FOOTLOOSE McGARNIGAL

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HARVEY FERGUSSON

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1924

HOT SATURDAY
1926

WOLF SONG
1927

IN THOSE DAYS
1929

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1930

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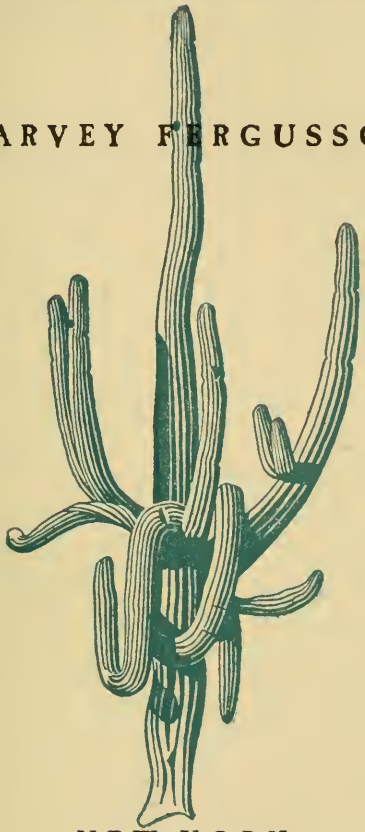
HARVEY FERGUSSON



NEW YORK
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FOOTLOOSE McGARNIGAL

RETURN FOR RENEWAL
EVERY 10 DAYS

Chapter One

ALEC took a chair in the club car and sat waiting uneasily for the train to start.

He felt at once eager and guilty. He wanted to go, he needed to go, he was hungry for motion and change. Nor could he discover any important reason why he shouldn't go. He had no dependents or responsibilities. No one cared very much whether he went or where. Yet he could not escape a conviction of delinquency, and this was a vaguely familiar thing, associated with many departures, reaching back among the years to days stolen from school and swims in forbidden rivers.

When the train began to move he felt a little better. The rumble and rhythm of hurrying wheels had always soothed him. He loved the sensation of being on his way. Relaxing, he stretched his legs, lit a cigarette and looked about at fellow passengers with the vague hope of the lone traveler that he may see a fellow spirit looking out of stranger eyes.

He saw none here. All these men were a part of what he was leaving rather than of what he sought. They quickened his guilt rather than his

eagerness. All of them were amazingly alike and all of them wore preoccupied self-satisfied expressions which repelled him because he was neither. They were men who found life a more comfortable thing than he did and a duller one. They read Suns and Worlds and Saturday Evening Posts and smoked large good cigars with the careless devouring satisfaction of those who always know where the next good cigar is coming from. All of them were carefully shaved and had good sharp creases in their trousers. All of them, he felt sure, had good jobs and wives. Each of them either was going confidently somewhere to make some money or coming back with money in his pocket to the comforting embraces of some woman to whom he had a perfect right. Only married men with good jobs could sit their chairs so firmly and look so confident of destiny and so patiently resigned to it. . . . Some of them dozed, they were weary. Some of them yawned, they were bored. But none betrayed in his expression the slightest doubt or uneasiness.

Alec looked at them with dislike, with a sense of alienation from the life they represented. He despised their apparent dullness and yet he envied the atmosphere of placid security they diffused with the rustle of their papers and the fragrance of their cigars. They made him reflect that if he had stuck to his job in New York he might have

made money—and money would have made marriage inevitable. A raise of at least ten dollars a week a year they would have given him. In seven or eight years he would have been getting ninety and maybe a hundred. By that time some girl would have owned him—it was only a moving man that escaped marriage. They would have gone out to some place like Jackson Heights and produced a baby. He would have been fixed just like George Heaton then.

George was his best friend in the firm and had been there ten years. He had two kids and another coming and he seemed perfectly happy. He could put in a whole lunch hour, and that meant nearly two hours, talking about Junior's tonsils or the time when Hazel had the second baby three days before it was due and he ran for the doctor and saved her life because he had been a track star at Cornell. Alec had heard that story six or seven times. George told it the way veterans talk about war. . . . Often he had commuted out to Kew Gardens with George and had dinner with him and Hazel and the children. Always he envied George a little at first. He envied his solid commuting contentment and his confident secure possession of Hazel with her white, soft, young-matronly prettiness. Hazel was just beginning to get fat and it was becoming to her. She was a sleekly satisfied person. Her conversation was a

contented purr and her laugh gurgled in tune with the electric percolator.

Hazel was a good cook. Alec always felt enviously happy eating deep dish apple pie while Hazel caressed him with a smile which was full of the consciousness of bestowing a taste of bliss on a lone young man. But after the coffee as he sat and listened to alternate tunes on the radio and stories about the kids, boredom and sleepiness came over him. One night like that he could stand, but not a thousand. . . .

That was what he had faced—a life of endless repetition—riding to work on the same train every morning, hanging his coat on the same peg, getting the same crick in his neck bending over the same blue print. . . . Something else he wanted without knowing what. He had thought it over a hundred times and always reached the sensible conclusion that there was nothing for it but to stick to his job. And he would have stuck but for that five hundred dollars his great uncle Alec had left him. Why, in the name of God, five hundred? It should have been either more or nothing. About a hundred of it he had spent breaking the monotony with a magnificent week-end spree. Next morning he went to the office with a hangover feeling of reckless power, demanded a twenty dollar raise and a month's vacation, threatened to go if he didn't get them—and went, to the ac-

companiment of harsh laughter. He remembered with a twitch of remorse what a perfect ass he must have seemed to the boss. It would have been so much better simply to quit. . . . Funny how a man could never forget the times he had made a fool of himself and how one of them always recalled another. His life now paraded through his mind as a long series of idiotic mistakes.

To get away from uncomfortable thoughts he moved to a new seat and stared out the window. They were passing through Jersey hills and the green and silver flash of spring landscape gradually made him feel better. He was glad to be going somewhere and he didn't care much where. Moreover, he could claim both destinations and purposes. He imagined himself explaining with dignity to one of his dignified fellow passengers. . . . He was going to Texas to look at some property he had inherited—yes, it was in the oil belt—and if he found time he might go on to California to visit his aunt. She was his only living relative except a few scattered cousins. Should a suitable opportunity offer he might locate in the West. New York was a great place to visit but a poor place to live. . . .

It was true he had an interest in Uncle Alec's ranch but also true it was mortgaged twice and had been on the market in vain for years. He had a real desire to see it but only a faint hope it

would ever put any money in his pocket. In his aunt he had no interest at all, except that she might afford a useful shelter in a storm of adversity. . . . If he told the truth he would have to admit that he was traveling because he had a little money and was tired of work, and most of all because every spring he was bitten by a restlessness that made his feet itch and his imagination burn with pictures of some place else. It had been the same a year ago, the end of his first year out of college. He would have gone then if he had ever seen more than thirty dollars ahead and he probably would have gone anyway if he hadn't met Arley.

He remembered now the desperate desire for escape he had known that first hot Sunday in June when the population of the city appeared suddenly to multiply by ten because all of it poured out of doors and went milling around in great damp noisy masses, poured in dense slow-footed processions through the streets, filled every park with its sprawl and litter, frayed out at the edges into a fringe of naked boys diving off rocks and docks into dirty rivers. He, just like the rest, had no place to go but had to go somewhere because his little third floor hall bedroom was too hot to stand. He was a sticky restless bit of a sticky restless mob.

Someone had told him up the river near Spuy-

ten Duyvel was a good swimming place, so he took a bathing suit and went, though not very hopefully. He found a park far up Riverside Drive that jutted a rocky point into the rushing Hudson tide. Children bathed along a dirty little beach behind the point and a group of hardy swimmers dived off the rocks into deep green water that ran like a mountain stream and looked clean although it must have carried billions of microbes. The rocks were not crowded because it took a good swimmer to navigate the tide and the water was a hundred feet deep. Alec stood awhile divided between doubt and desire. The heat decided him. If the others could take a chance, so could he. With deep relief he hit the river, head first, and came up feeling cool for the first time that day.

Several girls were among the crowd and Arley was easily the best looking and the best swimmer. She was a tall brown girl, not so pretty, but her figure was all you could ask. She seemed to be always with a party of seven to nine men and boys who trailed her loosely and grouped around her when she rested. She threw Alec a smile and annexed him to her string. He soon gathered she had picked up all the others the same way. They all called her by her first name and treated her with a sort of familiar deference. He recognized her as being of a kind he had seen before. Tomboy she would have been called in a small town.

At first he thought he was just one more recruit for a small army of admiration but before the afternoon was over he saw he was more. He was the chosen one, the one she had been waiting for. He would walk away with her and leave the others behind. His boredom died in a stolen clinch of wet slippery bodies behind a bush.

Arley was the one vivid thing in that part of his life and he remembered all his dates with her. She lived in a Bronx walk-up with a widowed mother who tried hard to be all a mother should, but with only partial success. Arley could always call an afternoon her own and sometimes an evening. Their problem was where to go and it grew with their growing need of seclusion. . . . That was when he realized the tyranny of poverty and crowds, the misery of being one in a million and no better off than the rest. Their desire was a homeless but obstreperous waif. She couldn't take him to her house because she was somewhat loosely engaged to a man her mother had picked. He could not hope ever to get her past his eagle-eyed landlady. Their life became a search for a privacy that didn't exist, except in accidental and inadequate moments. Yet they had good times—moonlight sails up the Hudson, packed among thousands on an upper deck with a great dark romantic world of cliff and water all around, nights at Coney Island riding roller coasters with

her arms locked about him in a frightened, frantic embrace, dances on tiny crowded floors where tightlaced couples jostled to the music of a fox trot, long hours in darkened movies blissfully sweating hand in hand. At Palisades Park they found a thing called the Red Mill where for a dime you rode in a little boat through darkened tunnels, and they stayed in it most of one evening, working up a high fever of futile longing. But their highest and lowest moment was one evening in Central Park when a fine summer rain had almost emptied it. They seemed to be alone in a forest surrounded by a faraway loom of light and a chorus of motor horns. Under a thick tree abandoned Sunday papers made a dry bed. He remembered fine drops of drizzle on her hair, cold of her wet cheek and warmth of her mouth. Her hands fluttered about his face and she said gently don't but raised no finger of resistance . . . and then the voice of a cop, filling him with a sickening rage the like of which he had never tasted before. . . .

In July Arley went to Patchogue for the summer. He got a few letters and then no more. Finally he learned she had married the other man.

His frustrated desire was a grudge he held against the city. It made him all at once aware that others owned the earth and were crowding him off. He stared with a newborn resentment at

fat rich idle women riding in limousines with Pekingeses. What had they done to earn their space? He stopped and listened to radical orators who gathered knots about them on the upper East Side and he even followed a street sign to a communist meeting. He used to get his breakfast in a Third Avenue restaurant run by a Russian who wore long hair and a large bow tie and was a professing revolutionist. His place was always placarded with picturesque announcements of red dances, picnics and meetings. When he found Alec was a little interested he began giving him a daily lecture on communism with his oatmeal and a forecast of revolution with his coffee. Alec listened with sympathy but he didn't feel much warmth of response. If the revolution had been set for next week he would have been all for it. He was in a mood to loot the National City Bank and use the Waldorf for a harem. But the revolution seemed too remote and also too weak to be of any use to him. The communists were a small and feeble lot for the most part. Although he was a little under six feet he had been a towering stared-at figure among them. He did not feel at home there and he saw little hope of conquering the world with the help of these tiny wistful people.

His affair with Arley had not made a radical of him, but it had tided him over the spell of restlessness that always struck him with the first warm

weather. This year no girl had held him and then came Uncle Alec's money along with the dandelions and robins in Central Park.

Conveniently he blamed his flight on the shade of Uncle Alec, and in more ways than one. His uncle had supplied not only the funds, but also, he felt, the inspiration. For all his recurrent dreams of far places, his vague yearnings for movement, danger and change, were associated in his own mind with stories Uncle Alec had told him long ago. He felt that a restless foot and a wish that didn't know its answer were his uncle's real bequest to him.

Uncle Alec had gone West right after the Civil War. He had helped to kill the last of the buffalo in the Panhandle, hunted wild cows in the brush country West of San Antonio, followed the silver strikes into New Mexico and Colorado, punched cattle on the Pecos, driven herds over the long trail to Abilene. Uncle Alec had been everywhere when everything happened. According to himself he had been a part of almost every phase of the old-time western life and out of it he had made a legend for the entertainment of his namesake. Alec could well remember the painful intensity of longing and interest with which those brave tales of horses and battle and gallant love had filled his young spirit. They had made the world he lived in seem intolerably dull. He had long enter-

tained a firm conviction that he had been born too late to know a life fit for a man to live.

Alec had been born in Texas himself, yet his conception of it and of the West in general was derived almost wholly from his uncle's lore. What he remembered of his own experience was a little wooden town spilled like a game of dominoes beside the Southern Pacific on a prairie flat and bare as a table, rimmed by distant lilac hills. He had ridden a pony and played at being a cowboy, and it was always wide windy country and galloping horses he thought of when his restlessness was in him.

Something of Texas had evidently stuck to him, young as he was when he left it, for he had been promptly nicknamed Tex in college. It was a peculiar thing how often a man from Texas got that nickname, although others were seldom named after their states. It was as though Texas put a mark on her children. There were four other Texans in his class and all of them were called Tex more or less. One of them, Gordon North, was a sort of professional Texan, wore wide hats and sang Texas ballads. The five of them used to get together once in a while, calling themselves the Texas Club, and tell each other bloody yarns over a bottle. It was probably his habit of retailing Uncle Alec's stories that won him his nickname—that and a little drawl.

Sometimes he used to wonder how much those stories owed to Uncle Alec's imagination, for he knew that some of them had grown and changed in his own. Imagination was one thing he and Uncle Alec had in common. In fact, as he had heard a good many times, it ran in the family. He remembered his practical, hard-working mother remarking often that all of the McGarnigals had more imagination than was good for them. It was certainly true of his father. The old man had spent his life and his money backing dreams that were never realized. He grubstaked prospectors that never returned, bought a patent on a corn-planter that would plant corn with the greatest precision but only about half as fast as a man, promoted a new city on the Texas prairie that never got beyond the stage of being staked out. Was he himself that kind too? The thought, coming suddenly, scared him. "I am always chasing rainbows." It sounded nice in the song. He remembered his father, gray and bitter, looking over a waste of sand and tumbleweed that was to have been a town. Endless disappointments had literally beaten the old man to death. But there was never anything of that bitterness about Uncle Alec. To the day of his death, as far as his nephew could learn, he had lived the same untroubled garrulous life, always deeply in debt and always with plenty of money. Alec's mother had died be-

lieving his uncle's ranches and gold mines would make her son a rich man. Alec snorted at the thought. . . . Just enough the old boy had left him to get him drunk, get him fired and buy him a ticket West.

Chapter Two

ROLLING across the flat middle West he was bored by the long alternation of sprouting cornlands and winter wheat fields yellowing ripe. In restless search of diversion he roamed the train from the club car at one end, where a blue fog of cigar smoke was forming over a shirt-sleeved poker game, to the observation car at the other, where ladies languidly turned over magazines while covertly looking for company and a few hardy adventurers fought a blinking battle with cinders on the platform. A tall thin pretty woman smiled at him and he sat down beside her, a little diffident, not knowing what to say, but soon found it wholly unnecessary for him to say anything. She was one of those women to whom silence is misery and her talk was an endless autobiography. She told him all about an auto tour she and her husband took in Kentucky and Indiana and she didn't miss a single stop or a single flat tire. Her memory was stupendous. She recalled unmercifully every turn in a road, every course in a dinner, every play in a bridge game. She never finished a a story. Her mind wandered weak and lost in a

trackless jungle of detail. She remembered every symptom of the thrombosis of which her aunt had died in nineteen-eight, although she herself was only a little girl then. When the aunt had been buried and a long obituary was getting under way Alec made an abrupt and violent escape and went away feeling as though he had hit the lady in the face and she had deserved it.

At the other end of the train he fell in with a man who traveled for one of the largest silk firms in the world, so he said. This fellow was beautifully arrayed in a gray ensemble. Suit, tie, socks and handkerchief were all faintly varied shades of it. It made Alec feel shabby just to look at him. His name was Shillady and he was one who knew, through certain high connections whom he could not name, the inside facts about almost everything. All of these were profoundly discreditable. He knew that the last great heavyweight fight had been fixed and he knew just how much the loser had received to let himself be knocked out by a blow that wouldn't have punched a hole in a cream-puff. He himself was at the ringside and moreover he had a friend who had a friend who was close to Tex Rickard. He knew that President Harding's great grandfather had been a negro. He had an informant high up in New York social circles who knew that the Prince of Wales had practically wrecked a country place on Long Island

giving wild parties. Alec thought that if he listened long enough he would get the lowdown on the Pope if not on Godalmighty, but he felt that the day was too hot for such sensational revelations and so he went back to the middle of the train and sat down in his seat for a while.

Several times he traded glances with a man about his own age who occupied a seat across the aisle. He hesitated to speak because his social adventures so far had made him wary, but something in the man's expression drew him. It was unmistakably a questing disturbed expression. Here was perhaps another fellow, he thought, who had not yet found his place in the world. . . . Looks finally made speech embarrassingly inevitable and they soon were sharing a seat.

Their talk grew steadily more intimate as only railroad talk between strangers can. It traveled a familiar route from sports to work, from work to drinks and from drinks to women. When women came up for discussion, Alec had often observed, some men became expansive and obscene and others sad and silent. This boy seemed to be one whose reaction was wholly serious. Before the discussion had gone far he turned away and sat looking out the window in silence for several minutes. Alec began to think that women had been dropped from the agenda when his companion spoke suddenly, shyly without looking round.

"This was to have been my wedding day," he said softly.

Alec moved uneasily in his seat, feeling that he had been hit a conversational blow below the belt.

"Yeah?" he queried weakly, feeling inadequate. "Sounds pretty tough."

"It is pretty tough," said the broken-hearted stranger, and by the sudden fervor in his tones Alec knew that a story was unavoidable.

It began romantically with a childhood love that had lasted through the years. It went on beautifully, like a serial in a magazine, to tell how this young fellow—Carruthers was his name and he lived in Iowa—had gone to work as a water-carrier for a road gang, had taken a correspondence course in engineering, had been awarded road contracts on low bids, had played in luck and made money. "Counting my trucks and scrapers and everything I was worth over fifty thousand dollars a year ago." Then came the contract that didn't pan out. A cloudburst washed out his fills before the culverts were in place and he rebuilt them and they washed out again. He went bankrupt at twenty-three after having made his pile and won his bride and set his wedding date. He had kissed a weeping girl good-by and sneaked out of his home town, ashamed to face people, and had been bumming from one job to another ever since, trying to get a start but only getting

discouraged. He claimed that he had gone as much as three weeks at a stretch without closing an eye in sleep and that on his last job he had walked around all night with the watchman rather than face the darkness alone.

Alec was full of sympathy. He was really delighted to find someone else out on a long limb with no idea how to get back. But as the story went on his sympathy waned. Carruthers was bound for Borchard, Texas, the center of the new oil boom. An old friend of his father was a heavy investor there and had promised him a job and a chance to put his money where it would do the most good. Moreover, the girl was romantically faithful. He exhibited a paragraph of a letter in which she had underlined the statement, written in a round school-girlish hand, that she would wait years for him if necessary. Anybody could see that it wouldn't be necessary. This chap would make another fifty thousand inevitably and inevitably he would marry the girl. People who made money easily and who knew what they wanted always irritated Alec.

He felt himself pulling away from this man too, but Carruthers evidently assumed that they were now friends for life. When he learned that Alec had a degree in engineering he proposed that they go together to Borchard. Doubtless the old friend of his father could provide two jobs as well as

one. The town was running over with money. They would clean up together. Alec thanked him and said that after he had attended to his business in San Antonio he might run up to the oil town and look it over. He knew these railroad offers were not to be taken too seriously, and an oil town did not answer to his rather vague conception of what he sought but he was grateful nevertheless, and glad to feel that he had a possible destination.

He and Carruthers spent three hours together in New Orleans before they left by different trains. It was hot there and so damp that pipe tobacco would barely burn. Wilted but interested they wandered down into the old French quarter. It was dark by that time and infrequent street lamps gave them dim and fragmentary glimpses of wrought iron balconies jutting out over the street, old iron gates in massive stone walls, tall shuttered windows and strange angles of roof and cornice against the sky. Surely something stirring ought to happen in such a place. He had a notion of the traditional New Orleans, gotten he knew not where, as a place of buccaneers and duellos, of lovely soft-eyed yellow women, of seductive and ruinous revelry. He felt that a beautiful octaroon ought to beckon from a balcony or a tall and menacing figure mold itself out of a shadow and rob them with a horse pistol a foot long. But the denizens of the quarter at that moment seemed to

be mostly negroes of a peculiarly polished shiny black and shuffling bums who held out dirty urgent hands for dimes. They got well lost in the course of an hour and walked a long dark narrow street where invisible prostitutes hissed at them from black doorways and rattled shutters, weirdly, as though ghosts of long dead lusts had moved and whispered.

The strangeness of the place stimulated Alec in spite of the heat. He would have liked to go on prowling for hours. If he had been alone he would have entered some of those mysterious doorways just to see what was behind them. But Carruthers was acutely uncomfortable in such surroundings and even, Alec suspected, a little scared. He called it a God-forsaken hole and saw no excuse for the gloom, the dirt and the exigent harpies. "If these people down here were more than half alive," he remarked with disgust, "they would clean up this place in short order. No town in Iowa would stand for it."

They agreed on being thirsty and had no difficulty in finding a saloon, for the places ran wide open with swinging doors. The one they chose would have done for a museum piece, with its battered bar and brass rail, its capacious brass spittoons, its pink-eyed sclerotic barkeeper and its back room where two frowsy bats in flowered kimonos quarreled huskily over a card game with

two old-fashioned barflies, sitting with hats over their eyes, emitting guttural obscene conversation between cigar-gripping teeth. The barkeeper poured tall glasses of yellow home-brewed beer and Alec downed his, finding it pretty good, but Carruthers made only a pretense of drinking and he didn't share Alec's appreciation of the place as a picturesque survival.

For dinner Alec wanted to hunt up Madame Begue's, of which he had heard, but when Carruthers learned it was far down in this same wilderness of gloom and vice, he declined. The partnership almost broke but Alec finally decided to let Carruthers take the lead. As though by an infallible instinct he found his way back to a region where bright lights shone on yellow taxicabs and the red fronts of United Cigar stores and wide shop windows showed ready-made suits, Grand Rapids furniture and sporting goods. He sighted a Child's restaurant, and there, a little apologetically, he proposed to dine. "I don't like them," he admitted. "They look too much like operating rooms, but at least you know what you're eating. This is the most poisonous looking town I ever saw. I wouldn't live in it if they gave it to me."

Munching pretty good ham and eggs served by a neat white waitress, Alec made up his mind that he would never go to that oil town unless driven

by starvation. He was well pleased to shake hands with Carruthers for the last time and bade him farewell with a cordiality that sprang from a deep relief.

"Don't worry about anything, old man," he told him. "You can't fail to make good."

It was true, too, he reflected sadly, as he climbed on his own train alone. Carruthers would walk into success as surely as he had walked into that Child's restaurant. And it came just as natural to himself to walk the other way. None of the McGarnigals had ever been any good. He had often heard his mother say that. She had done what a woman could to save him from being a McGarnigal, but he was gloomily afraid she had failed.

Chapter Three

HE woke up in Texas and all morning sat staring through the window, wishing the train might stop so he could get out and feel the earth under his feet and the sun on his skin. He had always longed to return to this country and now that he saw it his desire was confirmed. It drew him like a glimpse of a woman long remembered who seems even lovelier in fact than she did in fancy.

Yet this was not really the Texas he knew of his own experience as a boy in the western part of the state. They were passing through the country of giant mesquite, much farther east, and what he remembered as a scant shrubbery growing knee high was here a forest of gnarled spreading trees tall enough to shadow a man on horseback. Just breaking into new foliage, it clothed the gently rolling land in a delicate shiny green, and all the little glades among the trees were bright with the brief spring blossoming of Texas bluebonnets and with the rich enameled reds and yellows of cactus bloom. Infrequently the forest was broken by a brown square of

plowed land but most of this brush country was still a cattle range.

Although he had never seen it before he felt as though he had always known this region for it was here Uncle Alec hade made his start in a life of violent adventure, as a boy of nineteen just after the Civil War. He had joined the adventurers from both armies who set about making their fortunes by catching and branding the wild cattle that had run unclaimed ever since the beginning of the war. These lank red long-horns hid in the brush all day like deer and came out at sundown to feed in the park-like open spaces. Cowboys then broke from ambush and charged with wide-swinging ropes, each bound to throw and hogtie a wild cow before she could reach cover. They were fleet as antelope, those lean wild kine, and savage when they felt a rope. Many a horse was gored and many a man thrown under wild hooves. Uncle Alec always used to say that the championship roping of the rodeos was mere play compared to those wild cattle chases. . . . He worked for an Irishman named Geraghty, a black and evil-tempered giant who had ridden with Quantrell's Guerillas and had killed several men in private fights. Uncle Alec and Geraghty had a quarrel about something. It must have been about a girl for there was always a girl somewhere in the background of Uncle Alec's adventures. At

the time he heard the stories Alec had paid little attention to these shadowy beauties and now often found it hard to remember just what parts they had played. Anyhow, one day Geraghty, in a murderous fit of temper, broke a dry limb off a tree and charged down on Uncle Alec, rising in his stirrups, bent on smashing the boy's head. Uncle Alec dodged the blow, stooped from the saddle, snatched up a club of his own, and they fought out a primitive mounted duel, wheeling and charging, smashing at each other with their improvised shillalahs. Geraghty's club broke, he went to the ground with a broken head and Uncle Alec rode away triumphant to the fair reward.

After that Uncle Alec went north to the panhandle and killed buffalo for a living all one year. Something about a girl there too Alec faintly remembered—a Mexican girl in the town of Atascosa, he thought. He couldn't recall exactly what had happened, but he had always cherished Uncle Alec's description of a September night in the panhandle when the buffalo bulls were on the rut and the moonlit wilderness was filled with the low voluminous rumble of their amorous bellowing. What a music for a honeymoon! . . . He imagined himself clasping a slim brown girl while the night was shaken by that deep booming note of wild desire.

In the spring Uncle Alec rode away again, still farther north.

Always Uncle Alec rode away. Always he was splendidly mounted and almost always he left a girl behind, only to find another wherever he went. His stories were full of the praises of women and horses and Alec remembered how their qualities were somewhat confusingly mixed in Uncle Alec's language, so that his young hearer was never sure which he was talking about. "That gal at Fort Sumner, boy, lemme tell you, she was a high-stepper. Her gait showed blood." And again. "That little roan mare I rode them days, she was as sweet a piece of meat as ever a man set eyes on."

In Alec's imagination his uncle survived most persistently as a gallant figure on a fine horse, riding swiftly, eagerly to where some woman waited and again riding regretfully away, waving apparently inevitable farewells to tear-stained, broken-hearted but presumably forgiving maidens, who hung over garden gates, leaned in doorways, waved from balconies. . . . Always this magnificent equestrian approach, this sure but honorable departure. . . . What happened between saddles, since the tales had been told to a boy of fourteen and less, had been largely left to the imagination, and it was upon the details of these romances that Alec's imagination had later come to dwell in

somewhat bewildered speculation. That long career of gallantry could hardly have been a celibate one, but if problems of progeny and obligation arose they seemed never to have weighed on Uncle Alec's conscience. Certainly they never caused him to rest his silver spurs. Always the girl was merely sketched, the lover suggested, and always he merged into that figure of the departing horseman, waving the gauntlet of farewell from the turn of the road, the top of the hill, the edge of the timber. Always the friendly wilderness swallowed Uncle Alec again, saving him from all the more commonplace contingences of human destiny. His life stood unchangeably in his namesake's imagination as one long drama of adventure and escape.

Texas hills to Alec were the setting of a legend and their romantic beauty the fulfillment of a dream. His imagination peopled them with figures too fantastic to be real and yet more living than life. He looked upon this country of his origin and his forebears with a bewildered eagerness, hardly knowing what he hoped or wanted of it, yet yearning toward it with a desire that ran in his blood and pounded in his heart.

Chapter Four

SAN ANTONIO was feeling the effects of an oil boom when he got there. The whole town was moving to the tune of the gushers back in the hills. Money was easy and almost everybody drove a car. Streets were banked solid with parked cars and traffic was a honking tangle. He saw two cars bump and the drivers jumped out and looked at each other and laughed. Alec stopped to stare at them because in New York they would have cursed each other. "You can't drive one of them things and look back at the girls too," remarked the bumped one. "No sirree, you can't," the bumper agreed and they both got in and drove on still laughing. Texas appeared to be in a good humor, but besides that, he remembered, it was a Texas tradition to fight about insults and if you wanted to lose your temper you might still need a gun.

The weather was hot with a damp restless heat and the sidewalks were filled with a chattering slow-moving crowd. It was a well-dressed crowd for the most part and a tall blonde one. Not in a long time had he walked where so many men overtopped him. There were a few negroes and a good

many Mexicans from across the border in wide straw hats. These and the ragged palms in the parks gave the place a faintly exotic appearance but there was nothing quaint or old-fashioned about it. It had a bright new surface as though it had been finished yesterday. The Mexicans and the palm trees and a few old houses looked like survivals of something that had been superseded by this city of tall white buildings, electric signs, expensive women staring into wide shop windows and bright new cars almost too numerous to move. It was a little imitation New York, a hot bright excited little metropolis, a city full of drawling laughing country people who hadn't felt the fighting tensity of crowd-pressure that holds the New York mob in a killing invisible net. These Texans were like children playing at city with their bright new toy while the earth poured forth black streams of wealth to keep it going.

Alec went up to the top floor of one of the tall downtown buildings and called on a man named Chapman who had been his uncle's agent for many years. Chapman was a fat bald man who sat fanning himself behind a wide desk beside an open window. Over his shoulder Alec could see to the edge of the city where it broke into scattered roofs and merged into prairie.

Chapman was cordial and friendly and a little uneasy. "Of course," he said, "you know your

uncle's ranch is mortgaged for more than it's worth." He looked relieved when Alec nodded. "Time was," the lawyer went on, "about five years ago, when I could have cleared him twenty-five thousand on it. We had a boom in the Angora goat business then. It's all over now and your uncle wouldn't sell when he had the chance. He claimed to believe it would be worth more in a few years, but I think he really hated to see the goats get it. All those old time cattlemen hated sheep and goats. When he found he couldn't make cattle pay any longer he just let the place run wild. He could have leased it for a hunting preserve, too, but he wouldn't let anyone fire a gun on the place, although he was a great hunter himself in his day. The ranch is alive with deer and turkey. He used to plant oats just to see the deer eat them up. He had seats built in the live oak trees so he could hide and watch them feed and play. He was always talking about improvements but he kept the place just like it was a hundred years ago. He had no eye for business. I don't need to tell you that. I did the best I could for him but you can't make money for a man that isn't interested in money. . . . Sure, you can go out and look at it if you like. There's nothing out there but a lot of brush and live-oak woods and an old stone house that dates back to the fifties. It's still got the portholes they used when they fought the Comanchees and

the old bell they rang when they saw the Indians coming. He kept all that just like it was."

Chapman asked him about his plans and he recited his piece about being tired of New York and visiting his aunt and maybe locating in the West if he found a good opening. When he told about his work in New York, it appeared that Chapman was interested in a construction company.

"I might be able to put you on," he offered. "We need a man that knows blue prints. There wouldn't be much in it to start with, but the prospects are good."

Alec thanked him and said he would think it over. It seemed as though his old job had beaten him out here and lay in wait. Blue prints and a crick in the neck and good prospects far ahead—that seemed to be his destiny. Privately he was determined to evade it.

He went back down into hot bright streets and walked slowly, thinking that if his uncle hadn't hated goats he might have money now. While he tried to think what he would do if he had ten thousand dollars his eyes roamed the crowd. He always looked at faces when he walked alone, and in strange towns he almost always scraped acquaintances. When he was introduced to people, especially in crowds, he was often embarrassed and sometimes rude but he had a gift for hailing strangers. So he went now questing by

habit, half consciously. Even while he was thinking of Uncle Alec's unhappy aversion to goats his eyes were asking men if they were friends and girls if they were looking for lovers. Always a thousand eyes were turned away and a few eyes said no, but sooner or later eyes said Here I am. That response breaking through the blank surface of passing life, like a trout coming up from deep water, always gave him a thrill. People you properly met were always just like those who introduced them. Meeting people was an endless chain of sameness. But you picked up people out of strange worlds.

He walked many blocks, happy because he was where he had never been before and didn't know where he was going. He came unexpectedly to the square in the middle of the city where the ruins of the Alamo stood. Once it had been alone on the prairie. Now the tall buildings crowded it all around, but reverently spared it. Old white walls of soft stone with vines climbing over them enclosed a parked square and a cool cave-like building housed a little museum full of rusty guns and knives, and a counter where they sold the story of how Texans here died fighting to the last man. He knew all about it from Texas school books. To every good Texan that was the greatest battle in history, a thing still talked about, written about, made into movies even. Down the street he re-

membered seeing a sign in front of a cheap theater, "The Fall of the Alamo," with a terrible picture in full colors outside of Davy Crockett with a pistol in one hand and a knife in the other littering the landscape with Mexican dead. It was probably an awful film but he would go to see it. Anything with fights and galloping horses he liked.

Back at his hotel he ate a large dinner, bought a fifteen-cent cigar and sat in the lobby, voluptuously smoking. He still felt good but he also felt it was time for something to happen. He began to be eager for some kind of human contact and he studied the crowd in the lobby with a hopeful restless eye. Men and women came and went but no one looked at him, and for over an hour he saw none that held his interest. He had begun to feel sleepy and bored and a little doubtful when a young man across the lobby caught his eye. This fellow was short and stocky with roached hair of a sandy blonde and a face sunburned a bright red. Clear across the lobby it was noticeable that one of his eyebrows lifted in a higher curve than the other, giving him an expression of erratic surprise.

That wild eyebrow in an outdoor face appealed to Alec. Speculatively he studied the man. Without knowing exactly why, he felt almost sure that this was a college man, like himself, only a few years out. One college man could nearly always

spot another. Probably that four years of loafing left its mark. In this case what looked like a fraternity pin on the stranger's vest afforded probable confirmation of the guess. He walked over closer to the wild eyebrow and looked at the pin. When he saw that it was the emblem of his own fraternity he felt an almost superstitious emotion. Any such coincidence always tempted him to believe that some providence had touched his destiny. He tapped the stranger on the arm and held out his hand. It was taken promptly with a broad though bewildered grin. Alec gave the grip and the stranger exploded into profane hearty cordiality. "Well, I'll be damned! The first Phi Psi I've met in over a year. What's your name brother? It seems like I've seen you somewhere."

Alec often got that answer and sometimes wondered if he looked a little like almost everybody. They soon established the fact that they could never have met before, but after a little talk each saw in the other's eye a reassuring conviction that they were glad they had met now. Syme was the stranger's name and he had taken a degree in forestry at the University of Wisconsin two years before. He was on his way now from an assignment in Southern California to one in New Mexico.

"Boy, I feel good to be here," he announced. "Last night was the third time I've slept in a bed in nearly four months. We traveled with a pack

outfit out there and hardly ever even saw a house."

"It must be a great life!" said Alec.

"So you've got that bug too. . . . Well that's what got me where I am. I had a yen for the open spaces and the wild life and the idea of saving the forests for posterity and all that hokum. . . ."

"Why? . . . Don't you like it?"

"O, it's all right. It's like everything else. Looks better a long way off than it does close up. After you've lived on beans and had your hair full of chiggers for three months and haven't tasted a drink or looked at a pretty girl, you aren't so hot for it any more. Once you get a station and live in a house and ride a horse it's not so bad, I guess, but the first couple of years they just shoot you all over the map and you travel on your own shanks."

"I'd like to try it a crack," said Alec.

"Well, there's nothing to stop you. If you crave to walk twenty miles a day for a hundred dollars a month, it can easy be arranged. . . . Say, how'd you like a little drink?"

This was the real proffer of friendship, the benison of approval. Alec nodded profoundly.

"Fine!" he pronounced.

"Come on up to my room!" Syme jumped to his feet, his eyes shining, his wild eyebrow seeming to lift a little higher. "Say, I'm glad I found you. You know what I wish? I wish we could pick up a couple of Janes and go somewhere and shake a

foot and let come what will. Are you on? Good boy! You understand I've been in the bushes so long I need a little excitement. Hot baths and hot babies! Believe me, I've missed 'em both. Out there in the sticks you get so you take off your hat to a cow!"

Syme's room was littered with dirty khaki and leather boots. A Winchester rifle and a surveyor's compass stood in a corner. He plunged into a rumpled trunk and came up with a quart bottle full of a white glinting liquid which he set on the table.

"Don't be afraid of it," he said, pointing at the bottle, "and don't trust it either. It's a Mexican brew called *tequilla.* You can get it all along the border. It tastes mild as lemonade and it hasn't got much headache in it, but boy, how it does lift you!" He poured two bathroom tumblers half full and they touched glasses.

"Happy days!" Syme proposed. "We live but once!" He emptied his tumbler in one long gurgling swig.

Red-faced hot and happy they talked over drinks for an hour. They were Bob and Alec by the third drink and by the fourth they were planning a joint future. Bob wanted Alec to join his crew in New Mexico. He would have charge of a field party of six men and was empowered to hire four temporary employees. "Don't thank me old

man," he said. "It isn't generosity and it isn't the drinks. I'm supposed to recruit my help from among the local hillbillies and they're all so dumb it takes weeks to teach 'em how to draw a contour. A man that knows engineering is a find."

Alec felt himself strongly pulled toward this offer, partly because he liked the man and partly because the idea of going up into mountains stirred his imagination. The guns and khaki and duffle that littered Syme's room made a subtle appeal. He envied the man his sunburn. For the time being he made up his mind to say nothing. When Syme was sober he would find out whether this was really an offer or just a little good fellowship.

When the bottle was about half empty Syme sighted at it with one eye judiciously closed.

"We want an edge," he observed. "But not a stagger."

Alec nodded.

"Things look pretty rosy to me right now," he admitted. "If I drink much more of that Mexican lemonade they'll begin to look double."

Syme corked the bottle.

"We'll go out and look for a little adventure now," he suggested, "and drown our sorrows in the rest of it if we don't find any."

They walked down the street in a blue dusk spangled with many-colored lights. It was cooler

now and the city looked to Alec ten times as beautiful.

"Now if there's any two nice girls in this town looking for a little social adventure," Syme announced, "we're their huckleberries! In Wisconsin, I was the champion skirt-catcher of the chapter. I could pick up more girls and nicer girls than anybody else in the house. And it isn't my personal beauty that does it either. With me it's a science. I can always spot a girl that's in a receptive state of mind. She moves slow, for one thing, and for another she swings her hips. The wider the arc of oscillation the better the prospects. You don't so often find a lone one looking for company, though, unless she's an out-and-out professional and that kind don't interest me. Nice girls hunt in pairs. That's why I'm so glad to have a partner."

They walked slowly, their eyes roaming the crowd eagerly, but not too eagerly. If they didn't find girls they would find something else to amuse them. Girls were still only an adventure to them. Friendship was the important thing. They walked together in confident accustomed male solidarity and looked for girls as hunters look for game.

Two painted little flappers ogled them but Syme shook his head.

"Too young and too dumb," he said. "We can do better than that. Never jump at the first thing you see. That's one of my principles."

For an hour they scrutinized strolling couples, but without discovering the slightest indication that Texas ladies were looking for company. They stopped at a drug store to drink root beers before a marble-topped counter, staring at their own flushed grinning faces in a mirror painted with a long list of sundaes, flips and splits. It held also the reflected faces of two girls who sat at a table sucking drinks through straws. Without looking around each pair could study the other at leisure and each pair did, the boys boldly and obviously, the girls with covert glances that gave way to giggles.

Syme nudged Alec. "Not so bad hey? God is with us. Which one do you want—the little blonde or the tall brunette? Take your pick."

"We haven't got 'em to pick from yet," Alec suggested.

"No, but we will have. They're interested, sure as hell. Especially the little blonde."

Alec studied the mirrored beauties again. One was a tall thin girl with handsome features and black bobbed hair lying against her face in spit curls perfect as though painted in tar. She looked to him distinctly haughty and aloof. The other girl was small with pale reddish wispy hair, wide blue eyes and a soft indecisive prettiness. Both were bareheaded and wore skimpy silk dresses that revealed much pink silk stocking and a little

bare thigh when knees were crossed. Alec found it hard to guess what kind of girls they were because they looked so much like a thousand others.

When the girls had finished leisurely drinks each took out a small flat vanity case and powdered her nose with a series of swift dabs and a rapid circular massage. Each then drew a lip stick from its gilded scabbard and carefully embossed upon her mouth a perfect cupid's bow in rich cherry red. When this ritual had been completed they rose, paid their check at the cash desk and walked slowly out of the store, the tall girl leading with an incomparable swagger of silken hips. As they passed out the door the little blonde gave just the faintest suggestion of a backward glance.

"Come on!" Syme exclaimed. "Now is the time. . . ." He alarmed Alec a little.

"I don't know," he said. "I couldn't see that they gave us any high sign."

"You follow me," said Syme. "We'll pass 'em and then stop and look."

This maneuver was executed with dispatch.

"What'd I tell you!" Syme jubilated. "See that smile?"

"It was pretty faint," Alec said dubiously. "She may have thought of something funny just then."

"Something funny, your granny! It wouldn't be polite not to make a pass at 'em now. What the

hell do you expect? Think she's gonna run up and kiss you?"

"No, but we don't want to get pinched in a strange town."

"I never make mistakes!" Syme stated. "You're not getting cold feet, are you?"

"No, I'm game. But I want to be sure you're acting on your best judgment and not on that Mexican lemonade."

"It takes more than four drinks to cloud my judgment. Follow me, my boy, and you'll be all right. We'll split when we hit 'em and I'll take the tall gal because she's the leader. Anybody can see that."

Alongside the little blonde Robert looked down into wide timid blue eyes, meeting his in obvious confusion but without any anger. He got his hat off, cleared his throat, mumbled. . . . But the battle was being fought on the other front.

"Why, hello Margery!" he heard Syme's voice, clear and confident. "Where have you been all this time?"

"My name isn't Margery!" the tall girl's voice sounded cold as rain down the neck.

"What is your name, then?" Syme countered with perfect self-assurance, "we all make mistakes."

There was perceptible pause while the two strong ones faced each other like fighters meeting in a ring.

"It's Aileen!" the tall beauty announced at last, and the smile that wreathed her perfect cherry mouth was to Alec an immense relief.

"Aileen, the timid lad on your right is Alec, and my name is Bob. Who's your cute little friend? Edna? I always did like Ednas. If you girls aren't in a hurry let's all go somewhere we can dance."

They walked down the street slowly, two and two. Edna hung back and entrusted a soft hand to Alec's arm.

"I hope you boys won't misunderstand this," she said. "I never do anything like this—at least hardly ever. It's Aileen. . . . And the worst of it is I never know whether she's going to be nice to a man or just lead him on and then turn up her nose at him. Honestly she's awful. And yet she's a perfectly wonderful person. . . ."

Alec began feeling strong and adequate by comparison.

"I'm sure she is," he answered. "And so are you. It's awfully nice of you girls to take pity on a couple of wandering strangers, and please don't think we're presuming."

Edna hove a small sigh and entrusted a little more of her weight to his arm.

"I knew you were a gentleman," she confided. "As soon as I saw your face in the glass."

"Thanks," said Alec. He looked down at a

small pink hand with polished nails and saw a platinum band with a small diamond on her second finger and a plain platinum band beside it. She followed his eye with tremulous self-consciousness.

"Yes, I'm married," she said. "Isn't it awful! So's Aileen but she's getting a divorce. My husband's in Borchard. He's an oil man. Are you an oil man?"

"No," said Alec. "I'm an engineer."

"Oh. . . . Nearly everybody's an oil man these days."

Their conversation almost lapsed, but they walked with a certain mutual confidence.

Between the couple ahead passed a steady buzz of banter, broken by Syme's clear joyful laugh. Alec saw the tall girl give him a small good-natured slap. He judged they were getting along beautifully.

They led the way up a narrow stair into a Chinese place where a jazz orchestra drew a dozen couples from the tables to foxtrot in tight embraces on a tiny square of hardwood floor. They got highballs in coffee cups when Syme whispered a magical name which Aileen had whispered to him. Hot and eager they danced. Edna subsided against him in soft acquiescence. She danced well because she was a natural follower. Alec could see that Syme was having a struggle with his tall prize. Aileen danced with a backward lean which

gave her the appearance of being always about to break away from her partner.

By a little questioning Alec learned that both of the girls had come from Hot Springs, Arkansas. within a few months and did not know many people in San Antonio. Both had husbands whom the oil boom had snatched away from the fireside.

All of Edna's conversation had a flavor of mingled apology and self-justification.

"I've got a perfectly lovely apartment and everything," she told him. "But I get so lonely up there when Jim's away."

"Yes," Alec encouraged. "I should think you might."

"I don't believe in doing unconventional things, but in a strange place where you know hardly anybody, what can you do?"

"You can do what you please," Alec suggested hopefully.

"That's not what I mean," Edna explained with dignity. "But anyway a person wants something to happen, don't they? If you know what I mean. Something wonderful. Sometimes. You know what I mean? Are you like that?"

"I never put it to myself that clearly," Alec admitted. "But now that you mention it, I believe I am that kind of a bird."

"Something wonderful," Edna repeated. "Kind of romantic. But it never does."

"Don't give up hope," said Alec. "You're still young and so is the evening."

"You talk so funny," she remarked.

They danced until the place closed at midnight and then walked down the street, quiet and easy together, strangeness and fear rubbed off in rhythmical contact along with the powder that now decorated male shoulders instead of fair cheeks.

Syme was all for fresh adventures.

"Le's go to a movie!" he challenged. "Have they got any all-night movies in this burg?"

"Nothing but a little twenty-cent joint," Aileen replied, with a certain scorn.

"Well, le's go down and see what they have," Syme insisted and carried the others along with him, none of them very enthusiastic.

The show was "The Fall of the Alamo," which had already captured Alec's eye with its blazing posters of blood and fire.

"Shall we take a squint at it?" Syme asked. Edna was silent but Aileen was decided.

"I hate that blood and thunder stuff," she said. "What I like is Adolf Menjou in a good society film."

She and Syme turned away but Alec lingered staring at garish pictures, and Edna hung on his arm like a basket. Syme looked back. "Hey, you! Are you coming?" he demanded. Alec was aware

of a faint pressure on his arm. "No, we're going in," he said. "Well, ta ta!" Syme called back. "See you later, old man."

The girls traded parting looks which plainly had a meaning, but not one Alec could read. As he bought tickets he wondered whether this separation was as casual as it looked or carefully planned.

They sat down in a small dark theater, less than a third full, feeling curiously still and isolate, leaning a little toward each other, communicating in tentative contacts of knee, hand and arm. Alec felt happy, absorbed and expectant. Edna was a little hard to talk with but she was exceedingly pleasant to touch. She was a soft faintly perfumed mystery beside him waiting to be explored.

The film was a bad one with a flicker like heat lightning in a stormy sky. It began way back in Tennessee when Davy Crockett started for Texas in a wagon. One of his traveling companions was a beautiful young woman in a hoop skirt the size of a tent, and it soon became apparent that her virtue was menaced by a tall heavy-set villain in a frock coat and a wide black hat, a gambler by profession and probably a horse thief and a liar as well.

While Davy Crockett was making his tedious way across the great plains, Alec's hand was slowly cautiously adventuring down a round bare

arm in the general direction of an unseen hand which lay in a possibly receptive lap. He met with a setback when the villain made a violent effort to seize the heroine in his arms. She dealt him a staggering slap on the jaw and simultaneously Edna testified to the power of art by shrinking clear away from Alec's hand. They sat separate until the villain had been slaughtered and the march for Texas was once more under way. Then Alec's hand once more captured hers and they remained in chastely intimate contact until the Alamo was reached and an enormous Mexican Army was seen marching upon the handful of heroes within the fort.

The fight was really impressive. The man who took the part of Crockett had shortcomings in the emotional parts but in slaughtering Mexicans he displayed an incredible activity, serving three cannon at once until the enemy breached the walls and then fighting hand to hand against hordes of them. Drenched in his own blood, with musket, pistol and Bowie knife he piled up the swarthy dead. Colonel Bowie himself was seen making his last stand from a bed of sickness, producing countless firearms from under his blankets and fairly blocking the door with slain enemies before he finally died with a bayonet through his heart and a smile on his lips. The comic relief was admirably supplied throughout by a tall gangling fellow cap-

tioned the champion tobacco spitter of Tennessee. The volume and range of his expectoration was truly a thing worth going far to see. Alec cherished a ridiculous hope that he would finally spit on the Mexican army and drown it in one gargantuan mouthful, but the best he could do was to blind an ornate Mexican general with a shot in the eye before he too was spitted on a bayonet.

The last to die, of course, was Davy Crockett. Alec became so completely absorbed in the hero's final struggle that he forgot all about Edna. He was reminded of her by a sharp gasp, as of pain, and realized to his confusion that he had gripped her leg in a moment of sympathetic excitement as Davy seized a murderous Mexican by the windpipe. He turned to apologize but Edna met his look with a faint acquiescent smile. His rude gesture had been accepted as an impulsive caress. He pinched her leg again, more gently, and she captured and removed his hand murmuring a reproof so mild it was almost a benediction.

They rose and went out into the lighted street, smiling at each other, shy and a little sheepish, like sharers of a guilty secret. They walked slowly and silent for a number of blocks, both disturbed by a sense of impending climax. Alec finally asked her where she lived and hailed a late roaming cab. Inside it they collapsed into an easy embrace and rode through a storm of jolted blissful kisses.

At the door of an apartment house she held out her hand.

"Well. . . . Good night," she said. "Thanks for an awfully good time."

Alec took the hand in silence. He released it reluctantly.

She stood looking at him for a moment, smiling a little maliciously, evidently enjoying his disappointment. She seemed to expect him to say something but he was dumb.

"Well. . . . Good night," she said again. She walked away a few steps and then stopped and looked back.

"I'm sorry I can't ask you to come up," she added. "I've got such catty neighbors."

"Well . . ." said Alec.

He was too deeply disappointed to make either a protest or a plea.

Edna still hesitated.

"You're an awfully nice boy," she remarked.

"Thanks," said Alec, putting on his hat.

Suddenly she turned and came back to him. She took hold of the lapels of his coat. She looked around cautiously.

"Come back in about half an hour," she whispered, "and ring my bell. But if anybody's in the hall, don't come up till they go. . . ."

She turned and hurried away again.

"Good night!" she called over her shoulder in a high artificial voice.

When he came back she let him into a neat stuffy little flat overfurnished with overstuffed furniture in green plush. Confident and eager he went toward her, but to his pained amazement she fenced him off with both hands, ducking adroitly under his arm.

"You sit over there!" she directed.

Alec, bewildered, sat. Edna, opposite, seemed wholly changed. All her soft acquiescence of the theater and taxicab was gone. She wore a smile of mischief and triumph.

"You thought when you got me up here you could just do anything you pleased—didn't you?" she challenged.

That was exactly what Alec had thought but he didn't intend to give her the satisfaction of knowing it. Antagonists now, they eyed each other, each hiding what he felt, each trying to see through the other's face. Alec offered her a cigarette and she took it, although she hadn't smoked before. He found ash trays, provided lights, inhaled and blew out a mighty puff.

"No," he said finally. "I didn't think anything of the kind."

"You can't kid me," she told him. "Men are all alike. What did you want to come up here for then?"

"I wanted to have a long talk with you," he told her.

She crossed her knees, leaned back in her chair and narrowed her eyes at him, smiling. Her wide baby stare all gone, a cigarette between her fingers and a pretty pink leg waggling a tantalizing defiance, she looked strangely different, and more provocative than in her yielding mood. . . . This is lots of fun for her, Alec thought. Well, let her have a good time in her own way.

"What do you want to talk about?" she demanded.

This was a hard one. He had to think.

"Let's tell each other the stories of our lives," he proposed at last.

He meant this for subtle sarcasm but Edna didn't seem to take it that way. Her waggling calf came to rest, her cigarette burned low between her fingers, menacing the rug with a growing ash, her eyes widened and looked at nothing. . . . She brought them finally back to him.

"Are you really interested—in *me?*"

"I sure am," Alec responded as heartily as he could, and braced himself in his chair. "I want to know all about you—honestly I do."

"Well. . . . I do want to tell you, because you're such a nice boy, so you won't misunderstand, although I don't see how you can very well help it, but anyway. . . ." She paused and Alec settled

himself deeper in his chair and lit another smoke. He felt as though he were watching someone scramble up a long slope, slipping a foot for every foot gained.

"Anyway, my father was a preacher," she began. "That may not seem to have much to do with it but it really has got a lot to do with it. He was an evangelist, too, and awfully good. He's retired now. . . . Anyway, I was brought up awfully strict. Honestly my father would drop dead if he could see me now. I honestly believe he would drop dead. I just grew up in a Sunday school and then I sung in the choir. Jim sung in the choir too. That was the way we came to fall in love. We used to stand there with our hands just touching and sing together and Oh, it was lovely. I just can't tell you how lovely it was. I never have been so thrilled by anything since. Not even—well you know. You wouldn't believe it possible, would you?"

Her words poured now in a muddled torrent that testified to some urgent need.

"We kept company for over a year. Jim used to walk home with me from church and prayer meeting and it was six months before he even kissed me and then we got all excited and went down on our knees and asked God to give us strength. Can you beat that? But we really did. And then we were married with lilies of the val-

ley and smilax and six bridesmaids and everything and we went to Hot Springs to live. Jim had a job there and we had a little cottage in the suburbs."

"It all sounds perfectly fine," Alec remarked. "Please go on."

"Well, it was. Everybody said what a sweet young couple we were and how happy we seemed to be and I thought I was happy because they all said so. You know how a person is. If everybody says you're happy, you think you must be and I used to tell everybody I was perfectly happy. Of course I would have done that anyway. . . ."

"Well, weren't you happy?" Alec inquired by way of giving the narrative a push. She considered.

"I was and I wasn't. You know what I mean? It wasn't all so good in some ways. I was quite a little disappointed but I had all my housework to do and that kept my mind off things and Jim was perfectly lovely to me even if he wasn't all that could be desired in some other ways and anyway I'd been brought up to think that almost anything that felt good was a sin. You know what I mean? Anyway, I'd have been right there in that little house washing dishes to this day if it hadn't been for the oil. . . . You know what my father says? He says all this oil is just greasing the skids to hell. He says the devil sent it right up to make

the path of mortal man slippery. He said that in a sermon. . . ."

"He may be right," said Alec. "But how did oil come into your life?"

"Well, you see, Jim knew an oil man and he got a job in Borchard and this fellow let him in on a drilling and they struck it. It wasn't any credit to Jim. He had cold feet all the time and he wouldn't have gone in if I hadn't lent him part of the money. That's one reason I feel kind of free. At least I do some times. . . . Anyway, then we came down here and got this flat. Jim had to be in Borchard most of the time. At least he said he did. And he said it was no place for a decent woman. He was bound and determined I should stay here. And then he got started drinking. He never had had any money before and it just went to his head and he got to running around with a little painted creature down there. She didn't want a thing but his money. She couldn't have, because he didn't have much else. He thought I didn't know—thinks so to this day. But, believe me, I know every move he makes. Aileen's got a friend down there that keeps us posted."

Her eyes flashed fury now, and she talked with a hot abandon.

"Anyway, that's what got me sore. Me sitting in this stuffy little flat all week, waiting for him to show up on Saturday, and what good was he

when he did show up? All he ever did was to tell me a pack of lies. And then I met Aileen . . . and . . . well, she and I began seeing other fellows, you know, once in a while. . . ."

She paused and fussed with a handkerchief in her lap. She was painfully excited. Her breast rose and fell and he could see the blood beating in her neck. He was afraid she was going to cry.

"I suppose Aileen is a little wild," he hazarded, hoping to head the conversation in a new direction.

She looked at him thoughtfully a moment before replying.

"Aileen," she explained, "is a man-hater. So am I for that matter, especially when I'm with her. She had an even worse time with marriage than I did. I just can't tell you. . . . Anyway, she loves to lead a man on and then turn him down cold, and believe me she's good at it. That's our agreement—that we lead 'em on and then snub 'em. I'm supposed to be giving you the air right now. You can bet that fresh friend of yours is getting it. He's just the kind Aileen loves to slap. That's why I started to leave you at the door the way I did. But it didn't seem to work. If you had tried to get fresh then or kick up a fuss, it would have been fine, but you just looked kind of pathetic, like a little boy that's lost his candy."

"Thanks," said Alec, with dignity.

"Well, that's just the way you did look," Edna insisted. "And if there's anything that gives me the gollywobbles it's to have a person act hurt. I'm just too chicken-hearted for any use. And anyway, I'm sick of this whole business. Sometimes I wish I was right back in that little house washing dishes and going to prayer meeting. It wasn't what it's cracked up to be. It was an awful bore most of the time and I kept wishing something would happen, but I didn't know what, and at least I knew what I had to do. There wasn't any two ways about it. And now I don't know WHAT to do. Sometimes when I'm out with a fellow and we dance or something, like tonight, it seems perfectly lovely for a little while, but in the end it's always perfectly horrid. You have no idea how perfectly horrid most men can be. It seems as if everything Aileen ever said about them is true."

She sat silent a moment.

"O Lord," she said. "I wish I was either bad or good, but it's awful to be like I am. What is it a person wants anyway? It must be something that just doesn't exist, but you keep on wanting it just the same."

She looked miserable now. In fact, she looked as though she were about to cry.

Alec was uncomfortable too. Her story had bored him at first but as it went on it became a

spading up of the soil from which he had sprung. That western town she had lived in might have been his own. He knew the little wooden church where she had sung hymns and held hands and heard her father preach of sin and hell. He could imagine her marriage and her home, for he had lived in that same house himself. And he understood just how she felt now, trying hard to be a bold bad woman, facing a world too strong for her with the fear of hell in her heart, hunting romance on street corners and in drug stores, looking for a perfect lover and finding traveling salesmen who wanted a bedfellow for a night and not too much fuss about it.

She filled him with a mixture of pity and irritation. He pitied her because he understood and he was irritated because he didn't want anything to pity. Pity deflated his mood of gay and lustful adventure. His desire curdled and turned to shame. His woman of scarlet challenge became a lost and bewildered child. Her pink stockings looked somehow ridiculous now. Her painted mouth drooped like the banner of a rebellion that had failed. . . . All he wanted was to comfort her and get away.

He moved his chair closer and patted her hand.

"We had a good time anyway," he said. "At least I did. You don't hate me, do you?"

"No," she admitted looking down into her lap. "I don't hate you."

He gave the hand another pat, which was intended to convey an impression of finality. He rose.

"I must be going now," he said. "And if I come back this way . . ."

"No," she interrupted, looking up at him. "Please don't go yet. You're the only person I've found in months that I could talk to. . . . Please don't go!"

Alec backed toward the door.

"Well, it's pretty late," he began. "I think. . . ."

She rose and followed him.

"No, NO!" she plead. "Please don't go! I can't stay alone now, honestly I can't. A person has to have somebody. . . . I'm so lonely, I'm so empty!"

Suddenly she locked her arms hard about his neck with a decisive unbreakable grip. Her kisses beat on his lips, punctuating her words.

"You're going to stay!" she cried. "I don't care what you say. You're going to stay. And I don't care if I do go to hell!"

Alec went home in the dawn, companioned by milk wagons, cats, late drunks and early workers. He felt wilted, bewildered and a little sad. He

tried to put Edna out of his mind but he remembered her acutely with his nerves and his blood. He remembered her moment of abandon and her hour of remorse. He had tried to comfort her and assure her that her soul was all right, but she was heartbroken, both because she had sinned and because they couldn't go on sinning. She wanted him to stay in San Antonio and get a job and she couldn't see why he had to go on. He felt himself as though he had started something he couldn't finish, brought something into being and gone off and left it to die. . . .

He went unhappily but heavily to sleep and what seemed one minute later he was awakened by the telephone on the table beside his bed and then by Syme thumping on the door and coming in. He looked rosy and keen-eyed as ever.

"Sorry to rout you out of the hay, old man," he said, "but I just wanted to tell you the job will be waiting for you. . . . I didn't want you to think it was just liquor. . . . How'd you make out last night?"

Alec shook his head in sleepy confusion.

"Nothing doing," he said.

"Same here," said Syme. "That queen of mine was the world's prize teaser. . . . O well, it's the breaks of the game. We had some fun anyway. Better luck next time!"

Chapter Five

ON the crest of a bare windy ridge twelve thousand feet above sea-level Alec plunged the sharp steel point of his jake-staff into the sod, set his square Gurley compass on the brass knob that topped it and paused in his work to survey a large wild beautiful world.

A cold breeze dried his brow and the air had a quality of stimulus that made him feel intensely active. He had toiled upward for hours to reach this point but now he felt as though he could skip over several such ridges like a grasshopper over a plowed field. He had been aware of a lift in the air ever since he had struck the mountains but here he had reached a peak of exhiliration. Altitude was to a newcomer like cocktails on an empty stomach. His mind buzzed. He felt as though he could sit down on this summit and look back over his life as he did over the route he had come, seeing it all clear at last.

Feeling an unexpected weakness in his knees he did sit down with his back against a large outcrop of granite, filled a pipe and puffed smoke into a wind that ate it greedily.

He sat on the bald head of a range, looking down on dark timber-coated shoulders that sloped to a flat vague shadow-splotched plain. About a hundred miles away more mountains stood up fragile and pale blue like bits of fine shattered chinaware. Never before had he seen so far. The great earth shrank him to a pin point and yet he was the top and center of it too. After crawling around among New York crowds like one of a swarm of cockroaches it was bewildering to look down on several thousand square miles visibly inhabited by one buzzard wheeling on lazy wings. For all he could see he might have been the last man on earth or the first one.

He had almost forgotten he was neither of these but a government timber cruiser. This was his first day of cruising alone. Before that he had gone out with Syme who taught him how. He knew all about it now. You sighted a compass line and stepped off the distance, clicking the paces on a little machine in your left hand. With a barometer you followed contours of elevation, and with the help of a log-rule you made a guess at how much timber there was. On one page of a little book you drew a map of curling lines and on the opposite page you recorded the board feet of standing timber—if there was any.

Syme had given him something easy to start on. This ridge was as bare as the palm of his hand and

its contours were simple as those of half an apple. It really seemed a waste of life to walk across it four times as he was supposed to do. With the start he had made he could easily sketch in the rest of the contours and he did so with an artistic flourish, throwing in a couple of small imaginary gullies to give the thing form and character. In each of the little squares provided for recording the timber crop he wrote the word "none" in a large careful hand. He then closed the book with a feeling of satisfaction, lit another pipe and devoted himself to the contemplation of scenery.

He was unable just then to leave this summit. He knew he would leave his mood behind when he did and he hadn't felt so good in months nor so completely separated from everything he had ever done—from all failures, doubts, mistakes and fears. It seemed possible from this point to plan a new life and make it anything he wanted. . . . In the mountains all life looked so fresh and immaculate, everything was perfect—earth, grass, tree, bird. Nothing botched survived here, nothing lived too long. A sick man must have longed to lie down and die here, to feed the roots of perfect and necessary life. . . . He leaned back against his rock and puffed his pipe beatifically. The mountains were an upthrust of energy that had lifted him out of himself.

Forgotten time came back to mind when he be-

gan to be hungry. He had a lunch consisting of a chunk of boiled beef, a few hard biscuits and a handful of raisins done up in a bandana and tied to his belt. When he unrolled this snack it looked painfully small. He asked for nothing better but he wished to God he had something more. He could have eaten three such lunches. It was terrible to think that in all the country he could see, this was the only bit of really available human nourishment. Never had food seemed so precious. He would have fought a panther for it barehanded. He ate it slowly trying to make it seem more by much chewing. Even a piece of gristle he ground up between resolute teeth. Then he leaned back and gave himself up again to meditation and tobacco.

But food had taken the blood from his head. His mood was lowered. His conscience began to bother him. His flagging spirit was confronted by the fact that it was his duty to pace four times across his section. In such a place a man ought to have no more duties than a bird, but he had one and he could not escape it. It lifted him to his feet and sent him swinging down the long bare slope, patiently counting paces. When he next paused to take a sight he looked at his watch. The day was more than half gone and the job less than half done. He hurried while shadows began to gather like seeping water in the hollows and

the wind blew cooler from the peaks. When he had nobly paced his mountain four times without drawing a new line, the sun was a red wheel bogged to the hub in a black horizon. Hungry and tired he started toward camp, perfectly sure of his direction and he remained perfectly sure until he dropped off a ridge into the head of a canyon where stunted dark spruce timber grew about a bright green swale and a nascent silver river crawled out of the grass. Just such a canyon he had come up to start work but not this canyon because he remembered a tall lightning-blasted stub and it was lacking. There were so many canyons and so much alike. Was the right canyon east or west? He didn't know. And if he went down this one where would he come out? He didn't know that either. He sat down on a rock, filled and lit a pipe and prepared himself to face the fact that he was lost. Not seriously lost but uncomfortably lost. Given a few hours of daylight and he would find camp but he would have to wait all night for a few hours of daylight. The sudden mountain dark was running up the canyons toward the summits like a dark perverse flood. The ridge and the peak beyond were painted black on a hot red sky that died visibly like a lone coal on a cold hearth.

He was not scared but neither was he happy. He was conscious of this grand country now as a large cold hostile blackness piling up all around

him and of himself as a small helpless emptiness with nothing to fill it.

Food! If only he could eat now he wouldn't care. As it was he felt every minute worse for he grew weaker and colder. He started down the canyon, dubiously, a little shaky in the knees and a little light in the head. It might be a branch of the right canyon. If it developed a trail he would follow it.

He found a faint trail such as runs down almost every mountain watercourse. It might be only a game and cattle trail. He followed it down a long open stretch of canyon where the little stream tinkled secretly under a broad-leaved stinking jungle of skunk cabbage two feet high. The black spruce forest, looking dense as a hedge, closed in on either side, closer and closer, higher and higher, until he came right up against the black wall of forest, closing the canyon. It closed it for him all right. There he stopped because for one thing it would be hard to follow a faint trail through dark timber and also because a strong hunch inside him said no. He repugned at plunging into that black forest with a repugnance that asked no questions. It was useless anyway to hunt camp any more that night.

At the edge of the timber he stood. Sounds came out of it, too vague to place. He looked and thought he saw eyes but was not sure.

What troubled him was a feeling that he was not so much in a place as in a presence and unwelcome. His mind was obscurely filled with images, too, of things that hide in dark places and things that climb trees and spring down and more especially of things that follow. Wild cats and panthers such as might be here he had never seen, but nevertheless he could see now clearly without looking all manner of things that slink on padded feet with bellies close to the ground and look with green eyes of cold fire and no sense. He could see these things just as you see things in dreams clearly that you never saw anywhere else. It was just as though he had been born with images on his brain of beasts that long ago lurked by water holes and leapt from trees, and the dark forest brought them to consciousness. He heard again something move in the timber or thought he did and he could feel bristles he didn't have rise all along his spine and he grasped his jake-staff firmly. And yet he was pretty sure he was not really scared, but these feelings seemed as inevitable in this place as to feel wet when you fall in water. It was much like having a dream because his light-headedness made everything in a way remote and because he seemed to have become all imagination and no thought as if his intelligence had set with the sun.

At least he knew what he had to do—build a fire and sit by it until daylight. He fumbled for

sticks and smashed them with his foot, glad of his own noise, pulled moss and broke dead twigs off under limbs of spruce, struck a match and saw flame leap and chase leaping shadows. He gathered into a pile all the wood his flame showed and it was plenty. He sat with his back to a thick tree and its conical tower roofed him. He lit a pipe and smoked and felt not so bad now. Hunger had become only weakness. His stomach had given up all hope. He knew that he needed food but he did not crave it as he had a few hours before. He thought of all he had ever heard, mostly from Uncle Alec, of men lost without food in wild places. Uncle Alec once, yes, now he remembered, lost his horse in high mountains somewhere, perhaps not so far from here and wandered for days. But he had a gun and a deer walked up to his fire one night and he shot at the shine of its eyes and there he had good red meat enough for ten men. Something like that would always happen to Uncle Alec. If he fell in the ocean he would probably rise with a fish in his mouth.

Alec did not crave to see any shining eyes come up to his fire, nor anything else unless it would be a load of groceries or a hot dog stand. Something with mustard on it now would start him eating. The mere word made his mouth wet and he thought of mustard advertisements on the backs of the seats in Fifth Avenue buses telling how to

smear a thick steak with mustard and then broil slowly. . . . Better forget that. . . . Other stories of starving men Uncle Alec had told him. One he remembered about two men lost in the Texas panhandle without guns or anything for three weeks and they lived by killing rattlesnakes, slitting them open and broiling them over the coals. And then there was the terrible Boon Helm who bought a squaw from the Blackfoot Indians and got caught on his honeymoon in the deep snow. He killed the squaw, hung her up in quarters like a beef and lived on her until they found him. . . . That was being supported by your wife all right. . . . Alec now couldn't eat a rattlesnake, he felt pretty sure, much less a woman, but his weakness and emptiness made him realize for the first time what it was to starve. He understood how men could eat their shoes, their horses and even each other. Maybe only men who had starved and had fought for their lives knew what life was. Comfortable people only played at living. . . . What if it was five hundred miles to camp and he had to take a living from the wilderness barehanded or die? Well, thank God, it was only two or three miles and he couldn't fail to find it first thing in the morning.

The night grew steadily colder. When he piled wood on the fire it cooked his updrawn knees and burned his face like sun on a beach, while shifting

wind poured a black pitchy smoke in his face every few minutes. Then the fire would burn low and he would begin to be cold again. But slowly a great red bed of coals grew that needed only a little wood to keep it going. It gave steady heat and little smoke and he began to nod and drowse. Half awake he was aware only of red glow and steady warmth and other red glowing warm things came back to him. He remembered dressing when he was a little kid before the big base burner stove on cold winter mornings, and the heat voluptuous on his young goose-fleshing skin and his mother dressing and the fragrance of her long hair when she brushed it and a little chop house on Lexington avenue where they had red-shaded lights that shone on the varnished-looking surface of a well-done sirloin and on the sunburned brown of French fried potatoes and then that girl he used to call on at college that had the open fire and it was the only light they kept burning after the old lady went to bed. The girl used to sit on his lap and he remembered the ruddy glow of fire on her cheek showing fine silky red-gold down. . . . It was hard for him to believe he had known all such warm comfortable well-fed times.

Fantasies of food and women mingled and wavered in his mind, dissolved into the red warm glow. . . .

He slept for several hours until he was awakened by the still deadly cold that comes before the dawn. He was so cold it seemed impossible to move and yet at the same time absolutely necessary. His joints were stiff and the hard ground prodded him as though with malice in six places at once. His fire was a gray ruin and a wisp of smoke. Gray light was slowly separating the dark mass of the forest into trunks and branches and dragging a mountain up out of a cold pool of gloom. He knew he had to get up and pile wood on the fire before it went wholly out but it seemed easier to lie still and freeze. He could sympathize with people who froze to death rather than fight a growing numbness. He tried to conserve warmth by rolling himself into a ball but he only warmed his belly at the expense of his back. He finally heroically rose, leaning heavily on his jake-staff, feeling like a man of eighty.

By the time he had made the fire burn and thawed himself it was good daylight. Camp was not hard to find now but even after he had climbed the ridge and sighted the tents it was a hard job to walk to them. His legs were weak and he had to stop often and rest.

In the early morning wild things were on the move. He saw a deer, round and fat, bounce away from the little rill where it took its morning drink

and a coyote at the edge of the timber stopped and gave him a look of contemptuous surprise before it disappeared at a slinking loafing loose-jointed trot. He envied these creatures that lived fat and safe in the mountains while after one night he had to get back quick to groceries and blankets.

The cook yelled when he saw Alec coming across the open and all of the crew, with tin plates and coffee cups in their hands, got up and came toward him, laughing half in amusement and half in relief.

"Where have you been?" they wanted to know.

"I've been all over hell and a part of Texas," Alec told them, repeating a phrase he had heard his uncle use.

"All right, Texas," said Gelson, the cook. "How would some ham and eggs look to you?"

There was the name again and he was ready to bet he would be Tex as long as he stayed with the outfit.

"You can't expect a Texan to find his way around this country," said Griffith, the teamster. "I was down in Texas one winter and it's so flat you can see camp twenty miles away."

Alec didn't think it was necessary to tell them that he had done most of his wandering in the Bronx for quite a while. He sat down and began to eat, nibbling like a rabbit at first but developing

as he went along an appetite that seemed absolutely bottomless. All the food in camp didn't look like enough to him but he never finished his second cup of coffee. He set it down and leaned back against a log and went to sleep.

Chapter Six

HE didn't get lost again because he kept tab on his position by map and compass as carefully as a mariner. Even if camp was moved while the crew worked he could find it without any trouble.

His legs hardened and his days became one like another. Every morning he went out alone to cruise his section and lived solitary until night. Then came a huge meal for which he always had a huge appetite, an hour of pipes and talk about a fire, a sudden overwhelming need of sleep. His days went by so fast he didn't know what had become of them. He had always a feeling that he needed to stop, think and plan but he was too busy all day and too sleepy at night.

In July it began to rain almost every day. White clouds with dark bellies would begin to maneuver in the sky and perch like great birds on the peaks by the middle of the morning. Thunders would sound like great quarreling voices, some so close they crashed on the ears like curses in a fight and others far away, muttering, like someone going home mad but promising to come back and

raise hell. By early afternoon he would often see showers far off, sometimes two or three of them at once, falling in purple curtains across the sky and then he would know that soon it would hit him. At first he used to crawl under a thick spruce when it rained and keep dry but he soon found it was no use because when the rain stopped the brush was all wet and he had to plough through that with drops running down his neck and his feet sloshing. He would get gradually wetter and wetter, water slowly invading the utmost privacies of his being with its long cold fingers until it was a relief to be finally wet all over and no longer subject to cold surprises. He became indifferent to this discomfort and got so he would not change his clothes but stand by the fire and steam as do all men who are outdoors much in a wet country.

He no longer felt about scenery, freedom and altitude as he had at first. A ridge became to him something to get over, timber he saw in board feet and second growth was a wetting. Almost completely he lost awareness of the country as a spectacle, but often when he was heading for camp late and tired he was aware of it as opposition, piling up before him in waves of hard rock, submerging him in cold sudden darkness. More than once he would gladly have abolished the entire Rocky Mountains just to get them out of his way. Often he had a wish to escape them. He

thought of this period as an interlude which had necessarily to end soon.

He planned to ride to Taos in August and take the ranger examination. If he got an appointment as ranger or fireguard it would throw him right back into the mountains, but he would ride a horse then and that would be different. After so much travel on his own feet he yearned to ride a horse just to be riding. And a horse would make it easier to get out of the mountains and visit a town once in a while. The mountains wouldn't be so bad if you could leave them when you felt like it.

About what he wanted to do he was muddled, and the more so because he had almost ceased to think. Often he was aware of a longing for people and comforts. He thought how pleasant it would be to buy things in a store, to see girls walking in a street, to sit in a chair and sleep in a bed. But these desires were faint because all things seemed remote except the mountains and the little group of which he was a part. The mountains surrounded him, possessed him, walled him off off from the world. On rainy days and when he was weary he hated them, but there were bright cool moments that he loved. Every mile or so along his compass line he used to allow himself a few minutes to rest and smoke, and these pauses were the best of his life. He felt so complete and unbothered. He was always intend-

ing then to think out important problems but they seemed to disappear as soon as he confronted them. He would find himself wondering instead what the cook would have for supper, or watching a storm come up over a mountain, speculating on his chances for a wetting. Almost always, too, when he sat quiet for as much as ten minutes some wild thing would appear to beguile him from thought. It might be only a red spruce squirrel to jerk its tail and bark at him or a nut-hatch hunting borers up and down a tree trunk, but several times deer walked out of the timber and he often saw coyotes. He always watched these creatures with an interest that was intent and absorbing out of all proportion to anything they did. Once a four-point buck came to the edge of an aspen thicket not fifty feet away. He stared at its tense form almost breathless, not daring to move for fear he would scare it away, and the deer stared back in pop-eyed amazement. For full three minutes they eyed each other as though each had expected a revelation.

An air of mystery and suspense surrounded these wild beautiful perfect beings who showed and vanished like apparitions, and something of the same quality seemed to inhere in the wilderness as a whole. He felt as though if he just lay still and waited long enough he would find out something important. Some whisper or sign would come out

of that profound mysterious hush, that intensely living silence. He could not have expressed this feeling and would not have admitted it to anyone, but it was a part of the hold which mountains had gained upon him. He wished that he could spend some time alone in them with nothing to do but watch, listen and think.

He was learning something now about solitude as a habit. After the first novelty of his occupation had worn off he hated, for a while, to face those long voiceless days, but when he had gotten used to going alone he found that companionship bothered him. When the crew went out in a group to run a new base-line with chain and compass, he didn't like the shouted orders and having someone else to set the pace. Yet he liked the crew with an easy tolerance and was always glad of them for the hour or two between food and sleep.

He and Syme had become good friends and used often to sit by the fire after the others had gone to bed, talking of girls, death and money. Syme was in charge of the party and had four cruisers besides Alec. Herman Wernwag, called Whitey, was a Pennsylvania Dutchman who had taken a degree in Forestry at Yale. Harold Garber was a Yale product, too, and a native of Connecticut. He had put himself through college by raising squabs in a garret and mending umbrellas. The only thing he ever read was "Popular Mechanics"

and that lasted him all month for he memorized every device described in it. His conversation consisted almost entirely of minute and explicit descriptions of how things worked, except when he talked of women, and even then he leaned toward the mechanical rather than the romantic aspects of the subject.

Jim Case was the only one of the crew, besides Alec, who had not come out of a school of forestry. He was the son of a wealthy Kansas landowner, had taken a purely cultural degree at the University of Kansas and come West for a year of adventure before going into his father's business. He was a square blond man with a rudder for a nose, and a rock for a jaw. Life to him was simple. He had his future planned to the last detail and he loved to describe it. After this summer he was going back to Kansas and marry a girl he had already chosen and from whom he got a letter in every mail. They would tour all the principal cities of Europe on their honeymoon and during this period Jim forehandedly intended to lay in a stock of culture that would last him the rest of his life. He would see all the art galleries in Europe and read as much of the world's literature as he found time for on boats and trains. After that his wife would carry on the cultural tradition for the family and he would devote himself to land values. Mrs. Case would also contribute to the

partnership at least six children and she fully understood and faced with equanimity this predetermined proliferation. For children Jim had a genuine enthusiasm and also for good land that would take a plow. Mountains annoyed him by their unarable angularities, and whenever he came to a good level bit, free of stone and timber, he would stop and contemplate it lovingly. He longed for the ample flats of his native Kansas and for the ample curves of his Kansas girl, but he had come West for six months and he would stay his six months, patiently and with perfect good-humor. He was the best timber cruiser in the outfit, despite his lack of technical training.

Alec was the worst with the exception of Ellery Dobell, the Harvard man. Dobell was thin, sickly and refined. He came of one of the best families in Boston and he held himself apart from the rest of the outfit, but with such perfect natural ease that he gave no offense to any except Whitey Wernwag. A vague feud between these two always simmered but never quite boiled.

Dobell was not really strong enough to do the work. Syme gave him the easiest jobs and even so he always came in late and often white around the lips. Yet when he understood that he was being favored he firmly demanded a hard assignment and cruised it, coming in after dark three nights in succession. His courage earned respect but he

aroused no warmer emotion. It was known that he supported his mother, and he did not even allow himself to smoke. Every night after supper he wrote his mother a letter although the mail only went to town once a week. After he had finished the letter he spent about an hour silently working over his boots, mending small rips with a shoemaker's outfit he carried, replacing lost hobnails and greasing leather. Then he went quietly to bed. Once in a while he sat silent listening to the conversation that went around the fire, but when this reached the subject of women, as it almost invariably did, he would retire at once. Griffith, the teamster, opined that Dobell contained no blood. "If you cut him you wouldn't get nothing but water and not very warm water neither."

His only real friend in the outfit was Gelson the Swedish cook, who favored him in the matter of food and otherwise showed a compassionate attitude. Gelson was a puzzling figure to Alec. He learned from Griffith that Gelson's family owned a valuable stock farm in the eastern part of the state, but Gelson had chosen the profession of cook to cattle outfits, road gangs, surveying parties, and other such camp-living male aggregations, and he had stuck to it despite considerable hardships. He was a short fattish young fellow with wide hips for a man, a large mop of curly blond hair and a high musical voice. His only di-

versions were playing a mouth organ and picking wild flowers to wreath his wide Stetson hat. During his periods of leisure in mid-afternoon he was often to be seen sitting beside a brook or under a tree with blue bells in his hat, playing sentimental airs on his mouth organ. This job was by far the easiest and pleasantest he had ever held and he beamed with good nature most of the time. Griffith told Alec that on almost every other job he had taken, an attempt had been made to name Gelson Sis or Aunty or something like that, and he had also faced terrible epithets casting an obscene doubt on his gender. In each case Gelson had knocked hell out of somebody and established his right to be himself without ridicule or insult. He was not very strong but in time of war he was wont to use boiling water, hot skillets, butcher knives, rolling pins and other accessories of his calling with great suddenness and ingenuity. He had almost killed a cow-puncher by smothering him with a dish-pan full of dough.

Gelson was a good cook and one of the very few who could make a respectable pie in a sheet iron camp stove. In this group he was wholly appreciated. The wild flowers in his hat drew nothing but admiration and he was frequently requested to play "Turkey in the Straw" on his mouth organ. He was a happy man.

He and Griffiths stood a little apart from the

rest of the outfit and yet both of them were on the best of terms with the others. Griffith was by blood an aristocrat, coming of an old Welsh family that had lived in Virginia for several centuries. He owned a cattle ranch at the foot of the mountains and got for himself and his horses about fifteen dollars a day, making him easily the plutocrat of the outfit. He was a lean hawk-nosed man with dark red hair that somehow seemed the color of his whole being for he had the darkly passionate temperament that often belongs to the Welsh. He was subject to jovial expansions and to prolonged glooms when everyone was afraid to say a word to him. Every Saturday he mounted a fast little roan mare and rode with the mail to town and home, being thus the only one of the group who kept any contact with civilization.

As the time for his weekly departure drew near, Griffith grew always more and more morose and nervous. He watched the weather with an angry eye and cursed on small provocation. At these times all stood aside when he walked by. He was a man who inspired respect for his mood, whatever it might me. Gelson, snickering with delight, told the others it was postoffice gossip that Griffith's wife had bound him by an agreement to be true as long as he did not fail in his uxorial duties for more than a week at a time. If he did, then all nuptial obligations were off. In the light of this

delicate revelation the whole outfit felt a strong sympathy for its only husband. When Griffith prepared to make his Saturday ride they assisted him like pages attendant on a knight. One caught his horse and another ran for his saddle while a third held his spurs and a fourth tied the mail bags and his slicker behind the cantel. When he was finally mounted they sent him off with a hearty cheer. They felt that he was in some sense an ambassador from all of them to the courts of love and domestic duty, their only connection with the world of women.

The rest of them had not laid eyes on a woman for a month, but the longer they went without her in the flesh the more vividly she was present to their imaginations, demonstrating, as she always does, that to flee her is never to escape. When they sat down to talk at night woman was their myth and fable, early or late they always came to the same subject, jocularly designated as politics. Woman as an adventure, woman as a peril and a pest, woman as a symbol of all the virtues that had been preached and spanked into their childhoods—whatever their mood, woman was a subject that gave it play. She rose like a wraith with the smoke of their evening fire and danced in a hundred guises.

Each of them soon had brought forth all of his bawdy stories, the character of these being a nice

index to each man's taste and the degree and character of his sensuality. When their combined stock of this kind of folk lore had been exhausted they turned to those veiled and boastful narratives of personal adventure that are told in all groups of isolated men. Each of them now displayed his talent for romantic invention more or less, for on this subject few tell the truth.

Syme was easily the best artist in the group, but Whitey Wernwag held his audience longest, triumphing over his more gifted competitor by reason of a humorless veracity and an unrivaled store of material. All of the others had grown up under the conventional repressions of American life, but it appeared that in the isolated community of Dutch Pennsylvania which had produced Whitey, love was idyllically free among the young and marriage often a sequel to adventure. This freedom was strictly a community affair and did not at all extend to strangers. On that point Whitey was explicit and emphatic. He would not have any of his auditors go to Dutch Pennsylvania in the anticipation of an erotic holiday. When a small boy he had witnessed the mobbing of a traveling salesman who had made some conquests in a Dutch village and boasted of them. He was kidnaped out of his hotel and carried to a lonely spot in the woods and an awful punishment was

visited upon him, which Whitey seemed to regard as supremely just.

His own amorous experience had begun at the age of six, and had been continuous ever since until a romantic impulse had driven him toward the Forest Service. Now he lived in his memories and to a lesser extent in his hopes, for he faced years of hard labor in wild and womanless country. To him love was as simple as breakfast and almost as necessary. He cursed himself often and unctuously for having chosen a career that promised to be almost as celibate as the priesthood.

It was a little difficult and required much of Syme's fine diplomacy to get him started on his reminiscences for he seemed to be the victim of a perpetual doubt as to whether his long and successful career in venery was properly a subject for pride or for shame. He would at first watch his listeners with the narrow eyes of suspicion, but as he warmed to his tale he forgot everything except his own interest in it and the joy of talking. He was a glutton for detail, like most unimaginative men and he pictured the world he had lived in with a surprising solidity and amplitude. Alec gained a vivid conception of that rural Pennsylvania with its great kitchens, its huge meals, its perfect tended acres and barns bigger than houses, its rosy strong boys and girls, necking and rutting lustily in haystacks and lofts, under the fragrant

trees of orchards, in the deep grass of summer meadows. He listened to Whitey's stories with a deep attentive sympathy and often wished he had been born a Pennsylvania Dutchman.

Besides their shared interest in the absent sex all of these diverse young men were united by another bond, but vaguely realized, in the fact that all of them were in some sort romantic adventurers. All of them might have made more money and been more comfortable in business careers. They had been driven into the Forest Service by a longing for something beyond the bounds of what they had known, by a half-acknowledged yearning for a life of mountains and horses instead of money and machines. This was just as true of the stolid Case and the hard-headed Whitey as it was of Syme, who had been born for romantic quest. All of them were looking for something they couldn't quite find and all were a little bewildered to discover that life here too was hard work and monotony and that their dreams now all went back home. Yet all of them felt the pull of the mountains too and were glad of their adventure at times—especially at night when they gathered for talk, full fed and comfortable, conscious of their strong isolate male solidarity, defying the black mystery of wilderness night with laughter and fire and ribald songs and stories.

As the day came near for his departure Alec

felt a growing urgent need to be on the move and at the same time a reluctance to leave the group and the hard simple life he had found. He was surprised at the strength of his attachment to both, and his departure was recognized by all as an occasion of moment. Griffith brought from town a gallon jug of corn liquor and Alec's last night in camp was one of celebration and song, both solo and in chorus. When everyone was mellowed Syme got a whole sheepskin that Griffith used as a saddle pad, rolled it and tied it with a red bandana and held a mock commencement, conferring it on each man in turn as a diploma of elaborate degree. Gelson was B.P.C. (Bachelor of Pie Crust) and Whitey Wernwag was D.E.E. (Doctor of Erotic Engineering). Each graduate was called upon to respond with a song or story and the whole entertainment was a great success. It had a tense moment when Dobell was presented with a degree which commemorated his exacting devotion to his shoes, for no one felt any confidence in his response. He surprised them all by singing old English ballads in a weak but cultivated tenor, thereby lifting the whole occasion to a higher plane, after which he resolutely retired.

When all of the others had gone to bed Alec and Syme still sat for hours in alternate eager talk and long smokeful silences. They might meet again and just as likely they would not. This sad-

dened them a little and made them more conscious than ever before of their friendship.

Syme told Alec much about Santa Fe and Taos and the strange people who lived in them, for he had spent a summer in that region a year before. He explained that painters and poets had gathered in these mountain towns, almost taking them over for the summer, filling the streets with their queer costumes and shocking the natives with their wild revels. Syme had a friend in Taos named Harms, who was a painter himself and had introduced Syme to the society of the colony. Harms had gone highbrow but he was a good scout for all that. He would show Alec around.

"It's the most amazing collection of nuts in the world," Syme told him. "Not only painters and writers but just plain nuts. There's one fellow that dresses like Christ and goes around barefoot and a woman that talks to the dead and keeps all the Indians scared of her, and another woman that married an Indian—a great big greasy buck. . . . Well, I can't describe them all. You'll have to see for yourself."

Syme gave him also a lurid account of the Taos Indians who lived in a pueblo five stories high and centuries old. They were worshipers of the rattlesnake—a phallic symbol as Syme was careful to explain—and in their underground council chamber where no white man could go and come out

alive they kept a snake fifteen feet long and fed it a live baby every spring. Alec was not quite sure whether Syme really believed this story or just wanted to believe it. It was always necessary to allow for Syme's imagination, but even so, before he got done he had made Alec feel as though he were about to explore some mythical region where even the laws of nature were not obeyed.

"I've written Harms you're coming," Syme told him. "He'll be glad to see you. He's always a little fed up on the nuts even if he is one himself. He may ride out to meet you but if he doesn't look him up as soon as you get there. He'll take you around and show you the sights and he'll fill your ear as long as you'll let him. That boy is just full of language."

When Syme had talked himself out on the subject of Taos the two friends sat silent for a long time, a little embarrassed, feeling there was something more to say but not knowing how to say it.

"I'm sorry you're leaving the bunch," Syme said gravely at last.

Alec kicked a log into the fire.

"So am I," he replied. And that was all he could say, although he felt a great deal more.

For over two months he had been a member of "the bunch." It had been his family, his nation, his world. It had grown steadily in its feeling of solidarity even as everything else had grown re-

mote. All of them had been aware of this. More than once, around the camp fire, there had been long half-jocular discussions of things the bunch might do so that it could hold together. They might buy a ranch and run it. They might buy government timber on the stump and set up a sawmill. There was an abandoned mine they thought of developing.

Syme was always the leader in these discussions. Case was inclined to suggest disturbing practical difficulties, such as the lack of capital and transportation facilities. Whitey always wanted to know whether there were to be any women around the proposed establishment and he predicted that the arrangement would come to grief the first time one of the partners got married. All of them recognized the woman problem as crucial in such a project and various daring proposals were made for solving it. Syme suggested a communal harem, to be stocked with picked beauties and supported by the profits of the venture. Whitey was skeptical. He felt sure the girls wouldn't stay on their reservation and that they would make all kinds of trouble.

All of them recognized that their dreams of a united venture were made of nothing more substantial than camp fire smoke but the recurrent theme testified to a real desire. It had its appeal, this life of men and mountains, where woman was

only a myth and money a useless token. Leaving it gave Alec a qualm of which he was half ashamed. But he knew he must leave it. He didn't know why but he had no doubt. His going stirred a mood of sentimental confusion but if anyone had had power to stop him, he would have stolen a horse and gone in the night.

Chapter Seven

THE mountains east of Taos, as he approached them, looked almost as sheer as a wall, rising in dark forested slopes to peaks of bare rock spotted with snow. They were romantic mountains, like those in old-fashioned pictures. They seemed designed to be a setting for strange events, a home of incredible creatures.

Alec surveyed them from the crest of a long slope he topped late in the day and they lifted him sharply out of his saddle-weary, road-jaded mood. Streams poured down from them to meet and plunge through a single canyon into the deep black gorge of the Rio Grande which rent the flatlands twelve miles away. Between the mountains and the gorge they watered a small triangular valley that made a bright splash of green on shadowy levels of sage and lava.

It was a place off by itself, this valley, with the mountains on one side and the gorge on the other and a hostile flanking of barren lands. It awoke surprise and curiosity like an island sighted at sea.

Taos, like all the other old and famous towns of the West, was a name he had often heard on

his uncle's lips. Uncle Alec had been there, he didn't remember exactly when. Certainly long after its greater glory had departed, for Taos had been important in the days of the fur trade when Kit Carson lived there. It had slept in the sun for half a century, almost unchanging, almost forgotten, until the painters had discovered it. Alec had seen pictures of it as well as heard stories, and he rode toward the reality with eager curiosity.

He approached it by way of a dirt road, little traveled, over a rolling mesa clad in the dull gray-green of sage. He met no motor car, nor even a wagon, but he finally sighted a horseman coming toward him. The lone small figure several times appeared on hill tops and disappeared again, sinking slowly as the road dipped into wide shallow arroyos, until finally it emerged from one of these hollows not two hundred yards away.

It was a figure beautifully attuned to the landscape. The man was mounted on a tall, iron-gray horse and wore an immense hat, a red shirt and leather chaparejos with nickel buttons that shone in the sun. He might have risen out of the earth, he might have ridden out of the past . . . he might have, except that he seemed a little too gaudy, too theatrical. As he came closer, this disturbing touch of something incongruous was heightened by the revelation that he wore spectacles of the kind with heavy celluloid rims. One

couldn't imagine a man of action with spectacles . . . why? Anyway, they didn't seem to belong on him any more than they did on the nose of a beautiful woman.

The two scrutinized each other gravely as they drew together. The gaudy stranger reined his prancing mount.

"Are you McGarnigal?" he inquired.

The voice was cultivated, rather high-pitched, polite, with something faintly British about it—the voice of an American who has used other tongues than his own and lost the native flavor of it. His voice did not seem to belong under that mighty hat, any more than the spectacles did.

Alec admitted his identity and the stranger gave a pleasant wide grin and a warm handshake.

"I'm Harms," he said. "I guess Syme told you about me. How is the old boy? He and I played football together four years ago and he kicked out two of my front teeth. . . . Any friend of his is a friend of mine. I thought I'd ride out and see if I could be of any help to you."

Alec gave warm thanks for all this and talking of Syme, college, football and the Forest Service, they rode on. . . .

From the top of one of the low hills Alec saw before him two strange angular buildings of yellowish, almost golden earth, standing on either side of a bright clear stream at the mouth of a

deep canyon filled with trees. They looked like nothing he had ever seen before.

"That's the pueblo," Harms told him. "It is three miles more to the town."

As they drew nearer Alec saw that the place swarmed with people, like an East Side tenement. Men, women and children were going up and down the long spidery ladders that served in place of steps, sitting on the balconies and in the shade of the walls. The men wore generally blue overalls and shirts of bright colors. Some of them had white robes flung about their shoulders, like the togas of Roman senators, and some wore red blankets bunched about their middles. Most of them wore moccasins but some wore tennis shoes and most of them were bareheaded but some wore hats. They looked a little miscellaneous as to costume but still the general effect was pleasing. These people seemed to have a feeling for color and harmony, so that nothing they wore looked incongruous. The bright calico and gingham dresses of the women did not seem out of place. Their arms were all heavy with silver bracelets and they wore knee-high moccasins that made their legs look enormous. Most of them were very busy, running in and out of the houses, washing clothes in the creek, but all of the men seemed to be engaged in important discussions, squatting on their heels in the shade.

His uncle had told Alec so much about Indians that he had thought of himself as being quite familiar with them. Fierce warriors on prancing mustangs and soft-eyed squaws in beaded buckskin were what he had always imagined. Certainly, these were a little different from the Indians of his legend, but they were Indians and they were strange enough. The pueblo was an almost incredible thing, especially when one came upon it suddenly. It seemed unrelated to the rest of the world. . . . Old it must be but it didn't look old, partly because much of it was freshly plastered and some women were plastering walls with their hands even then. Rather it looked as though it had just been built for fun, like a child's sandcastle on a beach—a playhouse with children in fantastic costumes running in and out of its doors, up and down its ladders, laughing and chattering. For there was nothing taciturn about these red men. They were no more silent than they were red. A steady hubbub arose from the village, of gossiping women, shouting children, boys off somewhere chanting, dogs barking, goats bleating as they were driven down from the hills in compact little rippling spotted herds.

Alec stared at it all with a fascinated curiosity, much as he had stared at the wild animals he had glimpsed in the mountains. He wondered what kind of life went on within those walls and wheth-

er one could hope to mingle and talk with these as with other people. He felt that he could only look at them, watch them. They were like squirrels and birds in the impression they gave of living a life apart and mysterious, impossible to penetrate.

"Do you know any Indians?" he asked Harms. "I mean, can a fellow hope to meet them?"

"Sure. I know a lot of them," Harms assured him. "I use them as models right along. That's one nice thing about the Taos Indians—they'll pose for you. The artists here have them trained. Places like Santa Domingo, where they haven't seen so many whites, they think you're bewitching them if you try to make a sketch. These fellows will sit as long as you please at fifty cents an hour. They've got all the patience in the world and no idea of time. The only thing they won't do is undress. I found one little squaw that was a perfect pippin, and believe me, good looking squaws are rare. I offered her two dollars an hour to pose in the nude. All I did was to get in bad with her whole clan."

"I didn't know Indians were so proper," said Alec, thinking of stories he had heard of squaws bought for a butcher knife and a blanket.

"I don't know how proper they are," Harms admitted. "They say if you stick around them long enough they'll make you a member of one of

their clans and then you have all kinds of social advantages, don't you know. I wouldn't care for it myself. There's a painter here in Taos named Hickey that's part Indian himself and he stands in close with them. I'll introduce you to him if you're interested in Indians. He's about one quarter Choctaw, I believe, but it's enough to make him just as tight-lipped as any other Indian. He'll talk about them—up to a certain point. When he gets to what you really want to know he shuts up. He's one of the few men that ever saw them at Sacred Lake in the mountains where they have their grand orgy every summer, but you can't get him to describe it. Man, I'd give five years of my life to have seen that and painted it. . . ."

"What's it all about?" Alec wanted to know.

"Well, I don't understand exactly myself, but they regard the mountain lakes as doors to another world. They believe the buffalo and the antelope, and everything else that's been destroyed by civilization, went down into the lakes and that some day it will all come back up and the world will be like it was before the white men came. Every year they dance the buffalo dance with robes and horns a hundred years old and that's their prayer for a second coming of the good old days. All their most secret ceremonies are held at the lakes and this one in the full of the August moon is a mating ceremony. You can see them

riding up there—all the young bucks and girls in all their finery, but they say when the thing gets going they wear nothing but a little paint. Can you imagine it? A few hundred naked young savages meeting in the dance of all dances—the dance of love—of love before shame was born!"

Harms was rising to eloquence, but he never got far from the professional point of view.

"The only trouble," he said more thoughtfully, "is that so many of the squaws are squat and quite a few of them are bowlegged. Still, the average model you get in Paris isn't much better. . . . You have to stand her on her toes or else lengthen her legs to make her look like anything."

This point was beyond Alec, but he felt a growing interest in primitive life.

"Do you suppose I could get to know any Indians?" he asked eagerly. "You know, I had an uncle that was out here in the early days and he filled me with yarns about them. He killed a few and I think he married one, though he never said so in so many words. . . ."

Harms laughed.

"They don't kill them any more," he said. "It's against the law. But they still marry them once in a while. At least we have a rich lady right here in Taos who married one. But as for getting acquainted with them, that's another matter. It's my opinion that no white can get acquainted with

Indians, not even by sleeping with them. I've tried everything but that, and I'd try that if I thought it would be any use, but you simply can't discover an Indian's personality. In my opinion he hasn't got any. He belongs to an age before individuality was invented. He's nothing by himself. He's just a part of the bunch he belongs to, like a bee or an ant. You can talk with him by the hour and you get no nearer to him. He can't come into your world and you can't go into his. Here in Taos, we paint them and patronize them, and crowd around all their sacred ceremonies like boys watching a dog fight, and to them we simply aren't there except to the extent that we're a minor nuisance. . . . Man, I went to the Shalako dance at Zuni last winter, and that's where I learned how Indians really feel. Those Indians get nothing from the whites. They don't have to put up with us like these poor wretches. Their Shalako is a sort of housewarming, honeymooning ceremony. I wandered all over the pueblo and everywhere there were little groups of young men, all dressed up, whispering and peering at the girls that went by, standing outside the doors of houses where women were cooking huge feasts over open fires in two gallon kettles. Man, it was something to paint if you could catch it—red firelight on brown skin and red wool and silver and turquoise, and blue steam coming out of the cauldrons and the

black crowding silhouettes of the boys in the doorways—well, I can't do it in words, but anyway, I walked around among those groups for hours and I tried to talk to them. They not only wouldn't answer me, they wouldn't even look at me. They wouldn't acknowledge I was there. They lived in a world where I didn't belong and they simply denied my existence. I felt like a ghost walking among the living. I tell you, after a while I felt funny. I went back to the car and took a drink and kissed a girl, just to feel there was something I could connect with. . . ."

Harms stopped talking. He appeared to be thinking. He always seemed to be losing himself in his own idea and forgetting his auditor. . . . Alec was curious about him.

"Did you come out here just to paint Indians?" he ventured.

Harms, coming up from deep thought, looked at him with eyes of seriousness intensified by thick lenses. He seemed to be gauging Alec, wondering whether he was worth serious words.

"No," he said slowly. "I came in search of reality." He pronounced the word with emphasis and unction, like a priest mentioning a God. "Or at least in search of a better contact with reality. . . . I don't know whether you understand?"

Alec nodded his head solemnly three times,

eager to communicate his assent but not trusting himself to do it orally.

"I tried Paris," said Harms, "and I tried London. I painted a lot of slick-looking nudes and won a couple of prizes. I smeared up about an acre of canvas. But I always felt I was only getting the surface of things, instead of their meanings. . . . Then I heard about this place and I thought I would come out here and soak myself in a primitive life—a life of elemental realities. I went after Indians because I thought they lived close to the fundamentals. And I guess they do, but the trouble was I couldn't get close to them. I was just painting brown skin instead of pink and listening to the same studio patter in the evenings that I heard on the Left Bank. . . . Now I paint mountains. Not trees and waterfalls and grass, but rock, solid rock! I try to see through everything that lies on the surface and get at the hard iron core of things."

He was becoming exicted again. He lifted and clenched his hands.

"What I crave to paint now," he announced, "is the convulsions of a tortured earth!"

Alec again executed his triple nod, feeling that the conversation was traveling into regions where he could not follow.

They rode in silence for a while through the Indian farmlands, rank with the smell of ripening

crops. Tall corn grew on one side of the narrow road and on the other the bank of a ditch was buried under a thicket of wild plum heavy with small red fruit.

Rounding a curve in the road they met a girl galloping toward them on a pony. The pony shied and stopped short and the girl clutched the pommel and bounced, laughing, half frightened and half amused. Her bobbed blond hair bounced and her breasts bounced against her blouse. She looked supremely awkward and altogether charming. Alec wished she would fall off so he could pick her up, but she caught her balance, spurred her horse and shot by them with a white flash of smile at Harms.

"That's Amaryllis Oldfield," he volunteered. "She's a sculptress, but she'll never do anything as good as her own figure, I'm afraid. . . ."

"She sure is a peach," said Alec, twisting in his saddle to look back. "You wouldn't expect to see anything like that out here."

"You would if you knew the place," said Harms. "You're likely to find anything out here that didn't like it somewhere else. . . ."

"How do you mean?" Alec was bewildered.

"Well, Amaryllis, for instance, is a renegade Bostonian," Harms explained. "I don't mind telling you because she tells everybody that'll listen. She couldn't stand society, she wanted to live her

own life, she had a creative urge—you know the formula—or maybe you don't. Anyway, she gets hold of a little money and here she is. Nearly everybody here except the natives has some kind of story like that. The place is a museum of misfits. I sometimes think I'm the only sane and normal man in it, except for a few other painters who really paint. Nearly all of them piddle in some art or other, but only a few really work. If they can't do anything else, they can always go in for saving the Indians. That's the latest fad."

"Save them from what?" Alec wanted to know.

"Well, you'll hear all about that if you listen," said Harms wearily. "I don't follow it closely myself. It seems the Indians are being done out of their lands and also the government agents are trying to stop some of their dances on the ground that they're immoral. Can you beat that? I suppose a lot of their dancing is phallic worship but what is fox-trotting with a deb in three ounces of clothes? These Indians worship some kind of an aboriginal Priapus, but when you see how hard they work at it in the hot sun I think you'll agree it's about as voluptuous as hoeing corn. It's an outrage to stop them, of course, and still more of an outrage to rob them. But the trouble with all these Indian-savers is that they can't agree. That's why I don't go in for it. You have to belong to one side and hate the other and I don't propose

to waste my spiritual energy hating—or loving either, for that matter. I want to paint!"

This last Alec had already gathered for himself. He had never encountered anyone who wanted to do anything as badly as Harms wanted to paint. He thought Syme was right when he said Harms was a little crazy, yet he envied the man his purpose. He wished there was something he wanted to do that badly—and could do.

All the way to town Harms went on talking and Alec listened, interested most of the time and patient when the discourse was beyond his range. Harms needed a listener and Alec needed a guide. They were good friends before they got to town. Alec asked for the hotel, but Harms wouldn't let him go there.

"You come and have dinner with Hickey and me," he said. "We generally cook together. Tonight I'll take you over to Rynder's and show you the zoo. . . . Boole will be there and Alla Maya, too. They're the leading spirits in the Indian-saving business. Rynder is a painter who knocks out about a picture a week and sells them for five hundred or a thousand apiece. They look just like the kind of thing you see on a calendar that your butcher sends you around the first of the year with a bill—Indian shading his eyes and staring into the glowing West, Indian hiding behind a bush and getting ready to shoot a turkey

with a bow and arrow—noble red-man stuff for the tourist trade. He's a high pressure salesman too. If a tourist gets through town without buying a picture from Rynder, he's either lucky or broke. All the other painters hate him but they go to his parties because his wife is such a good cook. . . . The whole nut colony will be there and a few Indians and old timers for local color."

Alec thanked him and accepted everything. He felt that if he stuck to Harms and kept his mouth shut he might go far in strange and interesting directions.

They jogged into a little adobe town that seemed at first a perfect piece of the West he had dreamed about, the West of his avuncular legend. Here were the long low houses sprawling beside the hot sand of the road, the Mexicans puffing cigarettes in shady doorways, blanketed Indians padding by, ponies dozing on three legs at hitch racks. But oddly incongruous were the high-powered cars that bumped and rumbled through the narrow streets, the smart silky girls that rode in them, the painters coming home from work, dressed, many of them, like circus cowboys, but laden with easels and canvases. One of them had his model, an Indian in full feathered war costume, mounted behind his saddle. . . . It jarred upon Alec's sense of fitness to see an Indian greasing a Ford in front of a gasoline station and an-

other speeding by in a new roadster with his black and red queue bouncing in tune to the chuckholes. . . . It seemed to be a place where past and present had violently collided, upsetting the orderly processes of time and change.

Harms led the way to a small adobe house on the edge of town. They loosed and fed their horses in a corral and went into a long low room which was an odd combination of studio, museum and kitchen. Paintings hung on the walls and leaned against them, competing for the eye with Navajo blankets, straw plaques, potteries, beaded shirts, feathered head-gears and bows and arrows. The exhibits took up most of the space. The furniture was only a table, a few chairs, a rusty stove and a tier of shelves containing the meager commissary of a bachelor household. It was apparent that the two painters lived here, in the traditional western fashion, much like a couple of prospectors or cowboys.

"Hickey collects this Indian stuff," Harms explained with a wide gesture. "He also makes it to sell, especially dyed buckskin with bead-work. He can do a pair of Apache moccasins or a Sioux war shirt just like the real thing, only better. He's a good painter but since he got to making Indian stuff he hardly ever paints any more. . . . I think he went fishing this afternoon. We'll wait a while

for him but not too long. He never knows what time it is."

Harms started a fire and Alec volunteered to peel potatoes. They had supper almost ready when a loud yell came from somewhere down the road. Harms went to the door and answered. Then he began slicing fat bacon and throwing it into a skillet.

"That means Hickey's coming with fish," he said.

Hickey was a bulky strongly-built young man with nothing visibly Indian about him except a faint swarthiness and the fact that he walked with his feet perfectly parallel as an Indian does. He was distinguished from most of the painters Alec had so far seen by the modesty of his costume, which consisted of a hickory work shirt, a pair of overalls and canvas sneakers. He was wet to the knees and carried a large string of trout, still wet and slippery, gleaming green, white and pink. He greeted Alec, with perfect good humor, without surprise or enthusiasm, as though he had known him for years and expected him for dinner. He dumped the fish, which were already cleaned, into the hot skillet and devoted himself with complete absorption to the business of frying them. He evidently liked to cook and he took over the preparation of dinner completely, leaving the others in idle admiration. He French-fried the potatoes in

deep fat, spreading them on a paper to drain off the surplus grease, sliced a loaf, opened a can of strawberry jam and announced that all was ready.

All through the meal Harms held forth, gesticulating with his fork, often making three or four eloquent passes with a piece of potato before he could bring himself to eat it. Hickey said nothing, but ate with speed and precision. His face moved only in mastication. When the meal was over he got out a piece of bright yellow buckskin, sat down on the floor tailor fashion and proceeded to sew small red and blue beads into an elaborate pattern, stringing them on silk thread and binding them into place one by one. It was a task of the utmost tediousness but Hickey seemed to work at it in a spirit of profound unhurried contentment. Alec found it pleasant to look at him. It was like watching some large calm animal contentedly at pasture.

About an hour after supper there was a faint knock at the door. A young Indian woman came in, nodded to Harms and Hickey, threw off a bright shawl of patterned red and white, and began cleaning up and washing dishes. Alec watched her curiously as she went about her work, silent and quick, never raising her eyes. She was a formless creature, he thought, in baggy calico, with no more waistline than a bag of meal and short legs swathed in buckskin wrappings. Her face was al-

together too wide, her cheeks too heavy. Compared to the girls he was used to, with their sculptured legs, their expressive hips and mobile features, she looked amorphous, rudimentary, like a woman hastily blocked out by some careless creator and then forgotten. Yet her hands and arms were pretty and her face had a sort of flat placid comeliness. Moreover, she moved with the same unhurried precision that Hickey showed, as though her life were a stream that flowed from some well of profound repose.

Alec thought of all he had heard and read about men who fell in love with squaws, and he found it a little hard to imagine how they did it. There was certainly nothing provocative about this creature. Still, it was restful to look at her. She seemed to promise peace.

When she had done her work she threw her shawl about her head and shoulders, spoke a timid good-night in Spanish and departed. Hickey bound one more bead patiently into place, then rose and followed her.

Alec glanced at Harms and Harms smiled.

"Your maid, I suppose," Alec said.

"Hickey's, not mine," Harms replied. "He nearly always has some squaw coming around here and working for him. They even chop the wood. And I'm sure he doesn't pay them anything because he never has any money. He lives on less

than any human I ever knew. He simply trusts the world to feed him. I buy most of the groceries here and yet he does his share. He brings in fish and game, and fruit and vegetables the Indians give him and his servant problem seems to solve itself."

Alec sat thinking of Hickey with curiosity, with a sort of envy. It seemed to him just then that he too would like to go fishing for his supper and come home to a simple satisfying task and a silent primitive woman who never wept and had no problems in her life. In fact, Hickey and his squaw made it seem for the moment as though problems in life were merely imaginary—as though living was really just as simple as one chose to make it.

"He seems to be a happy bird," Alec remarked, hoping to draw Harms out on the subject.

"He is," Harms said. "Compared to you and me. The more I see of him the more I envy him. He's enough of a white man to have a mind and enough of an Indian to have that Indian peacefulness, whatever may be the secret of it."

"Just how much of an Indian is he?" Alec asked.

"I think his mother was a half breed," Harms replied. "He was born somewhere in Indian territory, his parents died when he was a few years old and Indian relatives raised him. Men that go Indian when they are young like that never get over

it. I believe they all pray to the sun and the moon and the four quarters of the sky as Indians do. I believe Hickey does it, though nobody could make him admit it. Anyway, he has that same complete untroubled acceptance of life that Indians have. They're a fragment of a lost world and they won't last much longer, and yet they're more at home on earth than any of the rest of us."

Alec nodded thoughtfully, interested, feeling that he was close to some profound truth. . . . He was at home nowhere. That was just the trouble with him.

"How do they get that way?" he wanted to know.

Harms laughed.

"I wish I knew," he said. "I used to think maybe I could find out by watching them, but there's nothing in it. Lots of people have discovered that —all these queer lost souls that hang around the Indians. Some of them pretend to be interested in Indian art and some of them are mixed up in Indian politics, but what really fascinates them is the perfect peaceful rhythm of the Indian life, going on as it has for a thousand years without missing a beat. Boredom and despair are what ail all of them more or less—I mean these sensitive souls that you find here—and the Indians don't seem to know the meaning of either. An Indian never kills time and he never kills himself and yet

he can die when he must just as serenely as he can live."

"They must have something we lack," Alec suggested.

Harms turned upon him the steady serious stare which always heralded his most portentous remarks.

"They believe in their Gods," he said solemnly. "As for us, we haven't any!"

Alec, in arrant young egotism, turned the question upon himself. He took a quick inventory of his mind and admitted it was true. He was wholly devoid of Gods. A Baptist Sunday school God had been lost somewhere long ago and nothing had replaced Him. . . . Yet if a God was what he needed he didn't know it.

Chapter Eight

THE long heavily-raftered living-room of Rynder's conscientiously Spanish house was even more of a museum than Hickey's kitchen. The floor was covered with the bold colors and patterns of Navajo blankets and the walls with the spoil of the Indian curio trade—the beads and buckskin, the feathers and straw and pottery of aboriginal art. An indiscriminate pillage of wigwam and pueblo was what it suggested. One end of the room was almost covered by a full length portrait in oils of a savage chieftain in war costume with eagle feathers crowning his head and hanging down his back. In his right hand he grasped a stone-pointed lance, while with his left he shaded his eyes, staring fixedly and with great dignity at a putative distant foe. He was conspicuously labeled, "A member of a vanishing race."

Having met his round red dutch-looking hostess Alec backed into a corner and watched the gathering of guests with amazement. Never had he seen such variety of costume assembled in one room. Some of the men were dressed like the cowboy of tradition and some affected an Indian

touch, such as a velvet Navajo blouse or a silver belt, but many of them resembled nothing he had ever seen or heard of. A favorite costume consisted of two shirts of contrasting colors, both open at the neck and often embellished with a silken scarf of a third color. Coats were scarce and pants did not lend themselves to much variety of treatment, but shirts and neckwear were wild. The man Syme had described came in wearing his beautiful Chinese robe, richly embroidered. He was tall and imposing, with a shiny bald pate, heavy-rimmed spectacles and three or four silver Navajo bracelets on each arm. He was accompanied by a slender young man who wore a conventional shirt and duck trousers, but with his sleeves rolled up and his collar turned in, giving an odd effect of girlish décolleté which was enhanced by a magnificent black and red sash about his middle. He was silent and had a sad unwavering gaze. . . . For contrast there was a stout elderly gentleman with a white goatee, clad in a white golfing suit, who looked at everything down his nose through a golden pince-nez, as from a remote height, and a tall heavy-handed, rawboned young man who wore corduroy trousers and work shoes and looked like a carpenter. A large wolfish dog followed him about and lay at his feet when he sat.

Nearly all of the women wore Navajo jewelry

of silver and turquoise and some of them were brilliantly effective in the bright red and purple velvet blouses and the girdles of hammered silver conchos which Navajos wear on feast days. . . . Alec was unreasonably offended by all this costume on the men but he liked it on the women. He felt bewildered and shy, as though he had come into a world where he didn't belong.

Harms at his elbow pointed out notables, including Mrs. White Horse, the rich lady who had taken to spouse a Taos peublo of that name. She was a squat, middle-aged person with an expression at once imperious and a little worried. Her husband, the only native present, was a tall heavy Indian, bunchy in the middle, dressed in riding trousers, puttees and a purple silk shirt with a pink scarf about his neck. His skin was a rich brown and his heavy black hair was gathered into a queue on his neck. He made an impression of sumptuous dignity but his British-looking legs seemed alien to his gorgeous shirt and his savage rugged head. When addressed he replied in careful English which sounded oddly like that of an Englishman, with the same broad A and precise enunciation. He seated himself with dignity and deliberation on the floor in a corner and proceeded to make and smoke small yellow cigarettes, his face wearing an expression of complete impassivity.

The guest who held Alec's eye most decisively

was Alla Maya, a tall thin woman of rigid stateliness in a flowing robe of yellow Chinese silk with a huge pendant of ivory hung on a cord about her neck. Her skin was dark and her deep-set aquiline eyes still darker. Her hair was sprinkled with silver, although she did not look more than thirty. Her high thin nose and lofty bearing gave a powerful impression of aristocracy. Some kind of primitive queen or priestess was what she suggested to Alec, reminding him of yarns by Ryder Haggard he had read long ago and also of a snake charmer in a side show who had deeply impressed him at a tender age.

"What is she?" he asked when Harms pointed her out.

Harms laughed.

"A poetess and an Indian propagandist by profession," he explained. "An east-side Jewess by origin, so I'm told. Her name was Alice Mayer or something like that. How she got here I don't know, but this is where she belongs."

"You better look out," he added. "I think she's got her eye on you. She always spots a stranger and pounces on him. She has that awful urge to bring everyone within her sphere of influence. She worked on me for a while. I used to go around blocks to avoid her, but she finally gave me up for hopeless. She said I had no soul."

"What does she do with the Indians?" Alec wanted to know. "She must be a hard one for them to understand."

"Not at all," Harms said. "She has enormous influence over them. They all think she's crazy, which I guess she is, and the insane are sacred to them. . . . There's Boole over there. I'll introduce him the first chance I get. He represents some wealthy eastern organization for helping the Indians. He can tell you more about them and their troubles than anyone else."

Boole was a tall lean man distinguished from most of the rest of the gathering by the fact that he wore a coat. The only decorative touch about his costume was a large flowing bow tie of a pale lavendar shade. His large greenish eyes, under thick dark brows, had a strikingly intense and humorless expression. He carried his head thrust forward and his unwavering stare seemed to bore a way for his words as he talked.

"You are interested in the Indian question then?" he demanded, when Alec had been presented.

Alec had an uncomfortable feeling that his interest wasn't really adequate, that it did not deserve such painfully serious attention as it was about to receive.

"Well . . ." he hedged. "I don't know a thing

about it. I had an uncle that was out here in the early days and he filled me full of yarns about the Indians. He killed a few. . . ."

"Ah-h-h!" Boole intoned the syllable in a rich baritone, so that it sounded almost like the first note in a singing lesson. "Your uncle killed Indians. He killed them, I dare say, in fair fight, in defense of his own life and property. . . . Do you know that white men still kill Indians, a helpless and defenseless race, kill them in cold blood, by taking the food from their mouths? And more than that, do you know they deny them the right to dance their dances? An Indian's dance is his prayer. When you deny a man the right to pray to his Gods you rob him of what is more necessary than food or love. . . ."

Alec nodded his profound assent and he went on nodding at short intervals for about half an hour. Not a word was required of him. He did not even have the chance to ask a question. He had already listened to more earnest discourse that day than he was accustomed to hear in a month and his attention began to flag and stray. His nod became automatic and Boole's monologue only a stream of soothing sound with an occasional idea, half perceived, floating up from its depths.

Over the man's shoulder he watched people. He watched them with curiosity but without

eagerness until Amaryllis Oldfield appeared and from then on his eyes followed her slim figure wherever it went.

Most of these persons looked as strange to him as animals in a zoo. He did not feel that he had any real and human relation to them. He hardly spoke their language. With Amaryllis, he thought, he might have something in common. . . . But that was not all and he knew it. Wherever he went, some girl became the center of interest for him and this annoyed him. He did not know what he was looking for but he was sure it was not a girl. . . . Girls were not what he sought but they seemed to be what he found. Only in the high mountains, in a world of men and trees, had he escaped for a while the ubiquitous skirt of his destiny. . . .

Amaryllis Oldfield never looked his way and this at once piqued and relieved him. He saw no way of meeting her because he couldn't get away from Boole. Evidently, he told himself, here was one girl he needn't bother about because she was not going to bother about him. She was probably just as highbrow as the rest of them and would look down her nose at him if he ever did get to her.

Resolutely he turned away from her, he met the steady fanatical gaze of Boole and concentrated his mind upon the Indian problem. Boole

was explaining why the government tried to stop the Indian dances.

"The Indians are worshipers of sex," he said. "For them the serpent is the symbol of life and the act of generation is its supreme fulfillment. That's why their religion offends all the official representatives of our civilization. We are deniers of love! We are worshipers of force and fear!"

His voice was tremulous with feeling as he delivered this eloquent peroration. Alec was impressed. It sounded fine. He nodded again, trying honestly to understand the man's idea, groping in his mind for facts to make it real. Wasn't it true that civilization thwarted love? He remembered the policeman chasing him and his girl out of Central Park and Edna torn between desire and the fear of a Baptist hell. Or was she really worried about hell? Anyway, the Indians had no hell. That was probably an important fact. And no police either, as far as he knew. Moreover, they seemed to have no shame, if what Harms said was true. They danced around naked together in the moonlight. They were worshipers of sex. . . . Well, what of it? He was no worshiper of sex. Sex appeared to him as a complicating and dangerous circumstance in life. . . .

He was no worshiper of sex and didn't care whether the Indians were or not. He lost the thread of Boole's discourse again and his eyes

wandered back to the Boston blonde. She was seated now directly opposite him between two others, both very much engrossed in her. One of these was a tall angular handsome person in riding trousers whom Alec took at first to be a man, but presently identified as a tall woman with large features and shingled hair. She contended somewhat obviously for the girl's attention with the young man on the other side of her, who wore a bright red shirt open at the neck, contrasting beautifully with his black clustered curly hair and pale sensitive face. Amaryllis sat demurely, smiling at her feet. She was all in blue, her hair was bound in a blue scarf, gypsy fashion, and her arms were heavy with Navajo bracelets. She was not a beautiful girl, Alec thought. Her mouth was too large and her nose was too short. But the brilliance of her hair and her skin made most of the other women look dingy and she had beautiful legs. She sat with that air of complacent receptive repose which springs from a woman's awareness of her own conquering charm.

Boole was successfully interrupted at last by a sandwich and a cocktail. When the tall shakers had rattled and emptied twice, men began rolling back Navajo blankets and someone started a fox trot on a phonograph. Alec, released at last from his thralldom, darted across the room at the girl in blue without having in the least calculated such

a move. What he yearned for was action. He was surfeited of words.

They hadn't met but he felt reasonably sure she wouldn't know whether they had or not. When he made his bow she rose, barely glancing at him and entrusted herself to his arms.

"This is awfully good of you," she told him. "I've been bored stiff for an hour. Jane Orell wants me to go on a trip with her into the Navajo country for a month and Hal Vopicka wants me to pose for him in the nude. They've both been dinning at me all evening and I know I couldn't stand a month of Navajos and I decline to pose, nude or any other way for anyone but myself. . . . By the way, who are you?" She rolled her yellow head back with a gesture of indolent grace and looked up at him with large inquiring violet eyes.

"McGarnigal is the name," Alec began a little stiffly. "We haven't met. I just took a chance. . . ."

"You took no chance at all," she assured him. "I would have danced with the devil himself just then. . . . When did you get here, Mr. McGarnigal, and where are you from?"

"This afternoon, and right down from the tall timber," Alec said. "I'm in the Forest Service."

She shook her head sadly.

"And I suppose you'll go right back to the tall

timber," she said. "Every time I meet a nice tall man out here he's either in the cattle business or the Forest Service and next day he gets on a horse and rides right back to his cows or his trees or something. I'm just crazy to know that kind of a man—one that really belongs to the country. I'm sick and tired of artists. I want a man that can look at me without thinking of paint. . . ."

"I can make that grade all right," Alec said. "I think I'll stick around a while. Is this where you live?"

"No, I'm just visiting here. I have a studio in Santa Fe. I'm going down to Santo Domingo to the corn dance tomorrow and then back to Santa Fe and work. . . . Work! That's what I must do. . . . You're not going to the corn dance by any chance, are you?"

"Boole offered me a ride down there in his car," Alec said. "I think I will. . . ."

"You must!" she told him. "They say it's perfectly gorgeous. I'm going to stand there all day long and feast my eyes on it. They won't let you make so much as a sketch, you know, but I'm going to just soak it into my soul and then go home and turn it into clay. . . ."

Music stopped and they sat down side by side. She turned and looked at him carefully now for the first time. After a long deliberate survey, she smiled a slow wide smile revealing large white

perfect teeth. It was unmistakably a smile of welcome, of approval, almost of appropriation. He realized with amazement, with a sort of sinking thrill that this rare and lovely creature had some use for him.

"You look like such a perfectly outdoor kind of person," she told him. "I just love sunburned silent men!"

She twinkled at him, challenging, half mocking.

"Thanks!" Alec said. "From now on I'm going to sit in the sun and say nothing!"

She laughed and then blew a out a deep breath.

"It's hot in here," she remarked.

"Let's go out and get some air," Alec suggested promptly.

They rose and started for the door, moving casually, with a kind of unspoken agreement not to make their destination obvious. But they never reached it together. The tall blond woman swooped down upon them and literally snatched the prize out of his hands. She bore Amaryllis away on a stream of talk, with a hand on her arm and the pale young man closed in from the other side. Alec stood helpless, disappointed. He was always inept at such maneuvering.

Before he could make another move, he found himself face to face with Alla Maya. She pinned him in his tracks with a glittering smile.

"Mr. Harms tells me you're interested in the Indians," she began sweetly.

Alec backed up against the wall, feeling as though he had been walloped on a spot already sore from much punishment.

"Well, I don't know much about them," he began automatically. "I had an uncle who was out here in the early days and he filled me full of yarns. . . . He killed a few. . . ."

"That means," she interrupted, "that you know less than nothing—that you know the Indian only as he appeared to his enemies. The Indian as a mystic and a seer is just beginning to be discovered. . . ."

At this point the phonograph started again. Resolutely Alec seized the lady about the waist and they began to dance. To his great relief this cut off her conversation completely. When the music stopped he deposited her in a chair between two other women, made a profound bow and retired.

The guests were now all banked against the wall, with the exception of a group of young men who had their heads together in a corner. . . . Amaryllis, wedged between her two admirers, was beyond his reach. . . . One of the young men picked up an Indian drum that stood in a corner and beat a thunderous roll upon it. The others began a fine imitation of the guttural Indian chant,

breaking now and then into wild sharp yells. Forming in a circle, they executed an admirable war dance, hopping and shuffling in perfect time, while the spectators clapped and swayed. Tony White Horse, who had gone to sleep in his corner, woke, stared and grunted.

The war dance marked the end of the party. Mrs. White Horse got her husband to his feet and led him away like a great sleepy bear, tamed and docile but unhappy. Regretfully Alec saw Amaryllis depart with her two possessive friends. She threw him a parting smile over her shoulder. Harms had disappeared long before. He took his hat, spoke his farewells and started for the door.

When he got there he found that Alla Maya was beside him. She took his arm and to his complete surprise they went out together as though by appointment.

"Do you know why you are going home with me?" she asked in her soft husky voice.

The question was embarrassing to Alec but she did not wait for an answer.

"You are going home with me because I have willed it," she went on. "And I have willed it because I know your need and I know that I can serve it. Yours is a beautiful soul but unawakened and unaware."

This attack left Alec dumb, uneasy and a little irritated. He wished he were going home with

Amaryllis. He hated to be dragged out of his course by anyone and he felt sure this woman was not sound of mind.

For a little while they walked in silence down a sandy lane between adobe walls. Half a moon shone on the angular masses of the little town, splitting it into blocks of black shadow and pale light. Stars were immense and vivid in the transparent mountain sky. The air was cool and heady.

Alec took deep breaths of it and felt better. After all he would see Amaryllis tomorrow. He felt sure she would be looking for him. His peevishness and confusion evaporated in the clear dry air. He stepped lightly, filled with the sense of power, the heightened alertness which he had so often felt in the cool mountain nights.

"It's a fine evening," he remarked by way of lifting the hush. "You know, this country has a great kick for me. It always makes me feel as though something were about to happen. . . . I can't exactly express it. . . ."

"You can't express anything," Alla Maya told him gently, almost tenderly. "Spiritually you are a babe who has not learned to talk. . . . What you feel here is the human richness of a place which is one of the spiritual centers of the universe —a place where men come without knowing why and stay because they must. The Indians have been here for thousands of years and all the great

spirits of the West came to Taos. This place is not merely old, it is also young. Here the past and the future meet and the dead work for the souls of the unborn."

To these revelations Alec had no reply. He resented her tone of lofty patronage but not very much. He felt that this woman must be treated with the tolerance due a mild and harmless lunatic.

"I am in touch with the dead as well as the living," Alla Maya went on. The serene assurance of her utterance gave it a sort of impressiveness and it seemed always to move to a tune. "That is why the Indians treat me with reverence. They too speak with the unseen powers. They know that I walk and talk with the dead. . . . Spirits are always about me wherever I am. What comes to you as a vague sense of unseen presence is to me a clear unfailing communication."

She spoke joyfully, with a lilt in her voice, as though to walk with ghosts were the most delightful thing imaginable.

They were out of the village now and walking down a narrow road in the black shadow of arching cottonwoods. The papery leaves of the great trees whispered in a light wind. Alla Maya was a filmy form beside him and her sandals were noiseless in the soft sand of the road. . . . He reached out and took her by the arm, as though to save

her from a possible stumble. She laughed softly and pressed his hand against her body.

"You mustn't be surprised or frightened if you hear voices," she said. "The unseen people are my friends."

They came to a small black block of an adobe house standing alone by the road, half buried in bushes, shadowed by a spreading tree. Alla Maya let him into a room and lit a candle. It showed walls washed with gypsum, white as a dog's tooth, a low bed covered with a black and gray Navajo blanket, a chair made of a rawhide slung in an unpainted frame, and one long littered table—a clean simple room which somehow increased his respect for its occupant.

Through a door that led to another room came a great yellow fluffy cat. It meeyowed and looked up at him and he was startled to see that its eyes had the tender blue of a baby's, giving it a weirdly half-human look.

When he sat down the cat jumped in his lap and curled there, heavy and warm, the rumble of its purr caressing his legs. Alla Maya sat opposite on the bed, leaning against cushions and smoking a cigarette in a long ivory holder.

"Erik likes you," she remarked. "His intuitions are perfect—even more perfect than mine because he is wholly free from the artificialities of consciousness. There are people he won't even stay in

the same room with and they always prove to be malign, no matter how little they show it."

Alec felt mildly flattered by Erik's endorsement but somewhat oppressed by his weight. He seemed almost twice the size of an ordinary cat.

"Tell me something about yourself," Alla Maya began. "Or would you rather have me tell you something about yourself. I can tell you, for example, that you are a seeker—one who has never found peace or a home. Am I right?"

Alec moved non-committally in his seat, more impressed than he was willing to admit even to himself.

"Anyway, I have a restless foot," he admitted. "I'm just bumming around."

"Just so," she said. "And yet—do you know? —you could sit down here or anywhere and find everything you need—if only you would see and accept the simple essentials of human destiny. When once you know how simple life is, everything you want is given—work and joy and—love!"

She brought out the last word with a lingering inflection and as she spoke she unobtrusively shifted her pose. A slim but shapely leg clad in yellow silk crept out serpent-like from under the folds of her robe, which at the same time she drew tightly about her body, revealing the contour of a small and pointed breast. She stared at him

steadily under lids that bisected the widely dilated pupils of her eyes. A being almost impersonal, remote and prophetic, had become in a single gesture a woman demanding attention for her charms.

Coquettish now she certainly looked but imperiously so. Alec felt not so much allured as summoned. He was tempted to obey the summons, and yet he didn't want to, either. He was half afraid of her, she was too strange an object for his desire, yet she dominated him by her amazing power of creating an atmosphere. She had sent a vague thrill down his spine with her ghostly talk and now she filled the air with a feeling of impending intimacy. The erstwhile prophetess had become a charmer. Her leg crept gently toward him and her smile suggested a secret knowledge of unspeakable delights.

Alec sat tight and lit his pipe.

"It sounds good," he said. "But I have never found it so simple to get what I want."

"It is your own fault." She nodded, slowly, impressively, never taking her hypnotic gaze off his eyes. "There is never any barrier between you and your desire but what you build inside yourself."

"But what if you don't know what you want?" Alec objected. He was warming to argument. He had taken about all the verbal punishment he could endure without striking back.

Alla Maya slowly lifted and dropped both arms

in a movement of undulating grace, her immense sleeves gently flapping like great silken batwings. It was a gesture whch seemed to waive all argument as a waste of energy for one who sat at the sources of truth.

"All human desire is one," she chanted softly. "And its name is love. All creation is love and all love is creation. When you have learned to love, all other things will come."

Alec shifted in his seat, disturbing the rhythm of Erik's purr. This woman's sententious profundities seemed to knock the conversation dead in its tracks. He had an impulse to get up and leave, and he was also tempted to go and lay hands upon her, strip off her garments of prophecy, reduce her to flesh and blood. . . . Divided between two desires he sat silent.

They both smoked quietly, the picture of peace, but the air was thick with conflict. Even Erik seemed to feel it. He jumped off Alec's lap, uttered a low meeyow and stalked out of the room.

Alla Maya drew up her legs and stiffened her back, removing herself once more from the world of the flesh. She seemed about to speak again when a faint tap came at the door. She turned her head slowly and said "Come."

Silently the black doorway framed the figure of an Indian, who was decidedly the most impressive Alec had so far seen—a young man, well over six feet tall and perfectly built, with wide shoulders

and narrow hips, erect as the new-sprung grass. His features were heavy and a little flat but handsome. His black hair hung thick and smooth, cut square across his narrow brow. He wore blue overalls and shirt, yellow moccasins, a red sash-like belt and a white robe thrown over one shoulder. Both he and his clothes looked clean. He stood in the doorway grave and supremely dignified, nodded curtly and grunted a guttural greeting. Alec stared at him in admiration. He looked so much as an Indian ought to look—stern, primitive and imperturbable. Even overalls could not rob him of a certain pristine glory.

"Hello, Moonway," Alla Maya greeted, rather coldly Alec thought. "Why have you come to-night Moonway? It was tomorrow you were to call on me."

Moonway said something brief and blunt in a strange language, presumably his own. Alla Maya listened unsmiling.

"Moonway, this is Mr. McGarnigal," she introduced. Moonway looked at Alec solemnly and gargled a greeting. Alec stood up and bowed. Shaking hands did not seem necessary so he sat down again. Moonway also sat, on the floor with his back to the wall. He took out a horn tobacco case, like a powder horn but much smaller, poured a pinch of tobacco on a square of corn husk and very deliberately rolled and lit a cigarette.

"Moonway is one of my best friends," Alla

Maya explained. "His Spanish name is Tony Ortiz but I call him Moonway because that is what his Indian tribal name means in English. Don't you think it's a beautiful name?"

When Alec had agreed that it was a beautiful name, conversation seemed to be definitely at an end. He sat looking at Moonway, his admiration of the man as a piece of scenery turning slowly into irritation. He wished the Indian hadn't come. He didn't know what would have happened in that case, but he felt that an adventure had been interrupted. Maybe, he thought, Moonway would go pretty soon, but Moonway's appearance did not encourage the hope. He looked as permanent there as the wall itself. He conveyed an impression of perfect repose backed by unlimited patience. . . . Indians had no sense of time, Alec remembered. He had been told that an Indian would lie in wait for a deer two days without moving and it would mean no more to him than two hours. . . .

Plainly, Moonway had all the advantage in this situation. Alla Maya looked distinctly fidgety and peevish, smoking hard and lighting one cigarette off the end of another. Alec himself was conscious of an undefined strain. He knew that if Moonway didn't go pretty soon, he himself would have to. Whatsoever prize was to be the reward of waiting would certainly fall to this timeless

and nerveless savage. He dominated both of the others by the sheer force of his resolute immobility.

Alec wanted to speak to him, if only to see the stony surface of his face crack in reply, but he could not think of anything to say. The Indian smoked and looked steadily at nothing. He seemed to invite conversation no more than a horse. . . . Alec rose and took his hat. Alla Maya came forward smiling, holding out her hand.

"Must you go?" She did not try to detain him, but she followed him out the door.

"You will return!" she told him. It was not an invitation or a command. It was a prophecy. Out of sight of Moonway she recovered at once her former mood and manner. "You will return!" she repeated with a deeper unction, taking his hand in both of hers. Reply to such a pronouncement seemed an impertinence.

"Good night!" Alec said.

He walked rapidly toward the village, getting relief out of action. Once he looked back toward the little adobe house, but it showed no light.

It was two in the morning and the village was sound asleep under a high-riding moon. No window showed a light and the only voices he heard were those of restless dogs. Aimlessly he walked all the narrow streets, looking for he knew not what. He was restless, sleepless, unsatisfied, filled with an

energy that lacked an object. After his long peaceful seclusion in the mountains this sudden plunge into a strange world was disturbing. He had touched many hands, heard many voices, but he had not quite connected with anything, either mentally or physically. In retrospect the gathering at Rynder's seemed only half real. Those gaudy figures were like something painted on a wall. Their words were a remembered babel. Only Amaryllis had seemed real and she had eluded him. He was divided between a desire to be back among the mountains, away from these confusing, challenging creatures, and a longing to understand them, share their queer lives, penetrate their fantastic words and costumes to whatever core of common humanity might be inside. . . .

He walked himself weary and finally went to sleep when roosters began to crow.

Chapter Nine

HE saw the pueblo of Santo Domingo first from a hill-top half a mile away. It lay on a long gentle barren slope between bald sand-hills and a river. A treeless huddle of adobe walls the same pale color as the earth, it reminded him of a mud-dauber's nest on a barn wall.

Beyond it the valley was green with crops. Low cottonwoods and willows fringed the river, worn by drought to a thin silver trickle in a wide bed of white sand. The valley was bounded on the other side by purple flat-topped lava mesas, and dark forested mountains shouldered above them. The sun shone hot and bright, pricking bare earth and earthen walls with sharp glints of flint and mica.

As he came nearer he could see roofs black with people and crowds and cars moving and stalled in the narrow streets.

It was a strangely mixed crowd as he found when he left Boole's car and started out alone on foot. Mexicans and ranch people, Indians from other pueblos, Navajos in their gala velvet and silver and turquoise, tourists off the Santa Fe Limited with cameras over their shoulders,

artists and poets and their followers from Santa Fe and Taos in their bright rebellious togs—never had he seen such various kinds of people brought together.

The town was mostly of one story, like a Mexican village. He walked in narrow dusty lanes between adobe walls, following a loose crowd movement, and came to a wide sandy plaza. In the center of this stood the khiva, temple of aboriginal worship, an oval adobe structure without doors or windows. A broad stairway ascended to its roof and the jutting end of a ladder marked the hatchway which was its only entrance. Not far from the khiva an image of the pueblo's patron Catholic saint was enshrined under a bower of cottonwood bows, and offerings of pumpkins, melons, corn and round Indian loaves lay before it. For an ignorant stranger the spectacle was hard to understand. Was this a church festival or a primitive ceremony?

Certainly the dance was pagan and it caught and held his eye as soon as it began. The dancers poured out upon the plaza in relays, the men swarming in a bright fantastic throng down the wide steps of the Khiva, the women coming in groups from the houses. Always a hundred or more were dancing. From noon till sunset, he had been told, the rhythm was never broken, the

drums were never still. This was a prayer for rain and rain was needed.

The men were naked except for moccasins and paint and breech clouts hung with fox furs and with many little bells and rattles. The women were barefooted but wore short black skirts and white blouses, with little wooden crowns upon their heads and sprigs of evergreen in their hands. Men and women danced in long lines facing each other. Women danced with little mincing motions, barely lifting their feet off the ground, but men danced with a free high-stepping grace and a sort of fury. Many of them were beautifully built, tall and strong, looking altogether superior to their squat broad-bottomed squaws.

All chanted in time to drums pounded by old men and the rhythm of everything was perfect—almost intolerably perfect. The rumble of the drums seemed to come from everywhere and the earth perceptibly trembled to the perfect timing of the dancers' feet. Their chant was guttural, monotonous for the most part, rising slowly in power and volume to a kind of roar like the rush of wind in trees, breaking then into shrill climactic yells as the dancers wheeled in squads, sinking again to a low rumble when the lines regathered. The whole mass of the dancers seemed to be shaken and shattered again and again by the merciless beat of the measure.

The only performers exempt from the rigid discipline of rhythm were a group of clowns, nearly naked, painted gray and white, with wide circles about their eyes, looking more like monkeys than men. They capered around the edge of the dance, making Indian jokes that provoked loud Indian laughter, receiving doles of food from women.

For an hour Alec stared, held partly by the strangeness of the spectacle and partly by the rhythm. The monotony of sound and movement tended at once to hold the attention and to exhaust it. When he had stared a while he turned away, minded to look for someone he knew, but the drums called him back and he found himself staring again. He tried repeatedly to concentrate his attention on a single figure and whenever he did this for a few minutes the dancer began to look a little ridiculous, hopping and sweating in the sun. But always the spectacle as a whole seemed to blot out the individual, and it conveyed an undeniable feeling of power and dignity. It filled the eye and it filled the ear. It looked as though it had always gone on and always would. It seemed as though the dancers were moved like a forest in a storm by a force outside themselves and the chorus of drums and chanting was its voice.

He finally turned away to look with a new curiosity at the row of spectators on the roofs. Some

of them stared, obviously fascinated, and some talked and flirted and laughed. He could see a woman in a white dress trying to take a picture with a camera concealed under a coat. Several Indians, all of them old men, patrolled the lines of spectators with long cottonwood switches. One of them stopped suddenly in front of the woman. With a quick twist of his wand he laid the camera bare. He struck a sharp blow and it fell to the ground smashed, while he passed on, never glancing back. The woman sat open-mouthed for a moment, then turned to a neighbor with shrill gesticulating indignation.

A little later on he saw one of the clowns dart up a ladder and crouch at the elbow of a man who was evidently trying to make a sketch on a tiny pad concealed behind his knees. The Indian's face was twisted with fear and pain. He hesitated a moment, then snatched the pad, tore it up and fled, ducking a blow.

The old men with the switches were busy all the time driving back spectators who tried to crowd too near the dancers. They seemed to be fighting desperately to hold a little area against invasion. . . . The longer he watched the more Alec felt he was one of a horde of intruders.

Searching the crowd for familiar faces, he saw Harms in the distance, unmistakable in his red shirt and two-gallon hat, standing with his feet

wide-planted, staring fixedly at the dance. As he drew near, Alec was struck by the contrast between the gaudy make-believe of the man's costume and the intense earnestness of his face. Somehow these wild-west togs did not seem an affectation on the part of Harms, even though they looked especially incongruous. Alec felt sure he wore them for some deep and important reason.

"I'm going to paint this thing from memory," he told Alec. "No detail—just movement and color. I'm convinced that when a white man paints an Indian's face he puts a white soul behind it, but if I can catch just the color and rhythm of the thing, I believe I'll have the primitive essence of it."

Alec asked him about the Catholic shrine at the other end of the plaza. "That doesn't seem so primitive," he remarked. "Are some of them Christians or all of them or what?"

"They're all both Christian and pagan and have been for a couple of centuries," Harms said. "It takes an Indian to have two religions at once and never get them mixed. When they have a drought like this they carry Catholic images around in processions, shooting off muskets, just as the Mexicans do. They pray for rain to all the gods they ever heard of. An old rancher who lives across river told me that about four years ago they carried

an image of Christ across their fields in a rain-making ceremony. That night an awful storm came up with hail and a high wind and ruined about half their crops. Next day, he said, he saw them parading over the same ground with an image of the Virgin Mary. He asked them if they hadn't had enough rain for a while, and they said yes, more than enough. They said they just wanted to show this woman what her son had done to them."

Harms took him to call on an Indian he knew, named Christino Naranja. A tall old man, his face heavily wrinkled and his gray hair bound with a strip of red wool, he received them with perfect courtesy. His little white room was clean. It contained two chairs, some blankets hanging on a pole suspended from the ceiling and some tanned goatskins lying on the floor. He spoke a little English with difficulty and reluctance. He agreed it was hot and that they needed rain. He accepted a cigarette and offered his visitors some small hard blue plums in a pottery bowl. Conversation seemed impossible.

A stout touristy-looking woman wearing knickerbockers came to the door, peered in, entered. She looked about at goatskins, Navajo blankets, dried onions hanging from rafters. She stared uncertainly at the Indian, turned to the two white

men. "It's all right to come in here, isn't it?" she asked. "I'm just looking around."

Christino Naranja rose and held out a hand to her with great dignity.

"You are welcome," he said. "What do you want?"

The woman stared at him a moment, tittered nervously, then fled. Harms and Alec soon followed her.

"That's Indian society for you," Harms observed. "For the most part, they haven't a thing to say to you and you have just as much to say to them. For that woman off the Limited they're just something to stare at, like a wild animal in a cage. To tell the truth, that's all they are to most white people—even those that claim to know them. A few of them have learned to talk to the whites because they've found it pays. Old Peyote Joe up at Taos is one. He'll look you in the eye and tell you you're his brother and he always expects to collect fifty cents for it. He can make a woman think she's penetrated into the very depths of the primitive soul. And all the time he's got his tongue in his cheek. . . . The best of them simply resent us and if you can't always see it, you can always feel it. . . ."

Alec left Harms staring at the dance, framing a vision with his lifted hands. For his own part he had stared as long as he could. He knew now

that he was looking for something else and he reluctantly admitted to himself that the something else was a girl.

He found her at last sitting on a folding stool in a shaded doorway with her chin in her hands and her fair brow knitted into a frown of concentrated attention. He approached her with hesitation, not at all sure of his welcome. He did not want to disturb another creative vision. But when she saw him she straightened up, sighed and smiled reassuringly.

"Am I disturbing you?" he inquired.

"Well . . . yes . . . you are," she replied sweetly. "I made Jane and all the rest of the party leave me here alone so I could study this thing, but my power of concentration is beginning to weaken. It's so strange and gorgeous that after just so long you have to turn away."

"Maybe you'd like to walk around a little while," Alec suggested hopefully.

"Yes, a little while," she agreed. "You must promise to bring me back though. I made a solemn resolution when I came out here this summer that absolutely nothing—man, woman nor devil—was going to interfere with my work, and so far I've kept it pretty well. . . . You know, for the past three years I've had the feeling that if I could just get myself to work I could do something good. I went to New York last winter and got a flat

down in the village and for about two weeks I worked day and night. And then I began to meet people and . . . well . . . lots of interesting things happened but I didn't get much done. Then I heard of this country and saw some pictures of it and I had a perfectly compelling hunch that this was where I belonged. I had visions of myself living way off alone in a little adobe house with nothing around but Indians and Mexicans and mountains and cowboys—no people that would be disturbing. Of course I knew there were artists out here, but I had no idea it would be like it is. You know Santa Fe is just like Greenwich Village—the same kinds of people, the same talk, the same gin—it's discouraging!"

"Why don't you go back into the mountains somewhere?" Alec asked. "There's certainly lots of room in this country."

"Why don't I?" she echoed. "Because I'm a woman and a woman can't do things like that. I had to fight three civil wars to get away from home at all. If I went gallivanting off into the mountains they'd send a search party after me."

They were walking down a narrow adobe-walled lane that led away from the plaza and toward the river. Alec took her by the arm to help her over the muddy ruts. It was a strong round young arm and it gave him a peculiar pleasure to possess it. He felt anchored to that arm, as

though he had found a point of rest after long and hazardous voyaging. Moreover, he felt sure his hand was welcome. When she talked of art and vision and her creative urge he felt a little lost and alien, but touching her restored his confidence. As they walked they carried on two entirely separate intercourses—one in words that halted and floundered and one of skin and fingers that throve and grew. . . . When they came to a narrow puddle he straddled it, put his arm about her and swung her across. She looked up at him and they both laughed.

"How silly you are!" she said. "I could have stepped over that."

He felt silly himself and at the same time absurdly pleased. He was almost sure now that she would let him kiss her if no one were looking and that possible kiss became the goal of his destiny. He did not contemplate anything beyond it but it made him feel foolish to be living in the hope of a kiss. Walking beside her with his hand on her willing bare arm he was intensely aware of her as something sweet warm and penetrable. He was losing himself in her aimlessly just as they were walking down this long narrow lane, without knowing where. They were going blindly toward some necessary supremely desired goal which took precedence over everything else. And yet something in him hung back. He wished he were like

Harms—filled with a burning purpose that would make a girl seem a nuisance or an incidental at best. At the same time he hoped she was forgetting all about her work.

The lane here was nearly deserted and the Indian drums and voices were a faint throb of excitement far behind. But they heard another music now somewhere ahead of them. It was a waltz tune, full of squawk and wheeze as though played on a bad accordion.

"What can that be?" she wanted to know.

"We'll follow it and find out," he said.

At the edge of the pueblo they came upon a pavilion made by roofing a small square of floor with green cottonwood boughs. The accordion was played by a little old blind Mexican who rocked to his own music, while a dozen couples of young Mexicans danced and another old man sold watermelon at a booth. It was evidently an independent enterprise gathering nickels and dimes at the edge of the fiesta and it seemed to be wholly a Mexican one. Not an Indian or white man was in sight.

The Mexican girls were gaudy in pink and purple silks and their swarthy faces were powdered to a tinge of blue. Most of the men wore cheap suits of bright colors, with bright bandanas stuffed into their collars. There was nothing of native

costume here. All the clothes in sight might have been made in New Jersey, and yet a taste for bright color combined with a complete disregard of fit to produce an effect that was unique and not a little grotesque. Amaryllis was delighted with it.

"I think they're perfectly darling!" she said. "Aren't they funny? But for God's sake, don't laugh. Look how dignified they are."

Dignity, indeed, was the keynote of this gathering. When the music started all of the couples solemnly paraded once around the floor and then proceeded to dance with a very fast hopping step. Their feet rasped an accompaniment on the sanded floor. They danced gravely, as though religiously, and neither laughed nor talked while the music played.

"You know. . . . it's perfectly absurd," Amaryllis confessed. "But I feel like joining in. I could watch that Indian dance for a month and never think of dancing, but these hopping little people make me feel like hopping too."

"All right," Alec challenged. "Let's dance! It seems to be a public place and our nickels ought to be just as good as anybody else's."

They were stared at but not with anything like resentment. They had a hard time catching the time of the music at first, but once started they fairly outhopped the Mexicans, going round and

round in ecstatic laughing circles. Amaryllis was flushed and her hair was a tangle, but she seemed delighted.

"Honestly, I don't know why, but I haven't had such a good time dancing in years," she said. "I'm getting frightfully hot, but let's not stop."

After the third round they repaired to the refreshment booth.

"Do you think you could tackle a piece of watermelon?" Alec asked. "It seems to be the only wet thing in sight."

"No, dear," she declined. "I begin to feel as though we were old friends, but I honestly couldn't let you watch me bury my face in a watermelon. . . . I'm thirsty but I've got my vanity too."

"Haven't you anything to drink?" Alec asked the man behind the counter. He was a small, stooped, oldish man with a scraggly gray beard and a face that seemed to be made of well-used leather, folded in deep wrinkles. He looked Alec long and steadily in the eye, as though reading the depths of his soul, then jerked his head in a dramatic sudden gesture toward the back of the booth. Alec promptly stepped around behind it and the little man met him with a large jug and a cup. He poured out the merest swallow of red native wine and handed it to Alec. Alec tasted and smiled. The little man smiled back, slyly. Alec stuck his head around the corner of the booth.

"Come here!" he called. "I've found something good!"

Amaryllis hesitated, tasted tentatively, drank decisively.

"It tastes good whether it is or not," she said. "I suppose it'll make us frightfully hot, but we're hot anyway."

Under the influence of the wine their dancing seemed to themselves positively gifted. They discovered steps and invented capers. They occupied about half of the floor but the man that took the nickels smiled upon them, seeming to feel their amusement value paid for their space. They were certainly the center of attraction. Once they collided heavily with another couple, almost knocking it off the floor, and bringing themselves to a stop. Alec started to apologize, but the Mexican was already bowing low. Alec bowed still lower, but the Mexican both outbowed him and had the last bow. It was a very courtly proceeding.

Their dancing was brought to an end at last by a change in the weather. The sky had clouded slowly. Suddenly the sun was hidden, thunder pealed and a high cool wind swept through the pavilion.

"It's going to rain!" Amaryllis exclaimed. "Oh, won't that be wonderful . . . the prayer answered! Come on, let's run!"

When they came in sight of the plaza a few big

drops were already falling. The voices of wind and thunder mingled with the rumble and scream of starting motors as spectators prepared to flee. Then the rain came in a sudden roaring downpour.

From the shelter of a doorway they saw the plaza emptied of everything but the Indians and the storm, the boom of drums lost in the boom of thunder, the lightfooted rain dancing with the dancers. . . . Rain had driven out everything alien. Indians danced alone to their responsive Gods.

"Isn't it wonderful!" Amaryllis exclaimed, risking a wet head to peer around the corner.

"Yes. Sure," Alec agreed, pulling her back. "Be careful. You'll get wet."

The storm worked for his desire, almost driving her into his arms. She took expected kisses with her eyes closed, saying only: "O, my dear!"

When the first hard shower was over she freed herself, pink and flustered.

"Now I must go," she said. "They'll be starting back. They'll be looking for me. . . ."

Alec tried to hold her.

"I can't let you go now," he said.

She pushed him off, talking breathlessly.

"I must. . . . I must run. . . . Listen! . . . Come to my place this evening when you get to town. No, don't go with me now. I'll tell them I

have a headache. I'll be alone. Yes, I promise. No, not now!"

She ran, stopped at a corner to wave . . . disappeared.

Alec walked slowly after, shaking his head, smiling. He felt warm, happy, confused and wholly indifferent to the rain. He took off his hat and let the rain fall on his bare head. It struck him this was foolish, but he didn't care. "After all, I'm used to the rain," he thought.

He was still strolling aimlessly in the rain when Harms stuck his head through the side curtains of a car and hailed him.

"Hey, you McGarnigal," he called. "Where the hell do you think you're going? Here's your last chance for a ride to town."

"What are you trying to do?" he demanded as Alec climbed in beside him, mopping water off his face. "Soak up the storm and take it home with you?"

"No," Alec said apologetically. "But somebody ought to show a little appreciation of this rain after the way those poor suckers worked to bring it on."

Chapter Ten

HIS way back to the mountains led for a while along a road where cars rumbled and roared. He had borrowed a little gray pony that was afraid of cars and his progress was a long wheeling struggle in a cloud of dust. Every time a car came along the gray wanted to leave the road and go straight up a mountain. Alec felt like a relic of some remote past everyone else had forgotten. He was tempted to turn the gray loose and beg a ride in a machine.

His difficulty in going forward was increased by the fact that his thought was always going back. He thought of all the strange people he had met and left, but most of all he thought of one hot night and one cool morning with a girl. A hundred times he had dreamed of an adventure like that—of meeting some lovely creature, possessing her without effort and leaving her without any obligation to return. It annoyed him to discover that the leaving was not without regret. He kept thinking there was something he had left behind, something he ought to go back for. He searched his mind and found there was nothing

except the girl. Had he fallen in love with Amaryllis, he wondered? After considering the question carefully he had to admit that he didn't know. He didn't even know what kind of a person she was. Sometimes she had seemed absurd and sometimes charming.

What he remembered was not a person but a string of moments and attitudes which did not hang together in any consistent whole. He remembered sitting waiting in her cluttered little flat, littered with books and letters and crowded with clay figures, mostly of children, including a number of bulbous Indian babies that looked grotesque to him. He remembered Amaryllis in a dinner dress that was always slipping down over one round creamy shoulder, talking loftily about her work, smoking too many cigarettes. He remembered his baffled feeling that she was building up a wall of unshared emotion between them, his clumsy efforts to break through it by making love to her. There had been a struggle and his elbow had knocked down and shattered one of her clay babies, leaving him speechless with guilt and embarrassment. He remembered Amaryllis comforting him, first with words and then with kisses. . . . It was the broken image that had opened the way, and after that she had seemed a wholly different person.

At first he had been impressed by her highbrow

talk, and then he had thought it a bluff or an affectation, and finally he hadn't cared whether it was or not. . . .

What bothered him now was an obscure feeling that some issue had been raised but never settled. He felt like a man running away from a fight with the lust of battle still pounding in his blood.

He might have stayed. . . . Certainly he hadn't been urged but he had a hunch Amaryllis felt somewhat as he did. The trouble was there was nothing in Santa Fe for him to do. . . .

He was glad to get off the highway and pick up a trail he had been told to follow for a short cut. It wound and twisted among low hills of red earth and redder rock. The weather had been even drier than usual and the ground was burned nearly bare between widely scattered cedar bushes, dingy with dust and heat. Most of New Mexico seemed to be made of these little red hills where no one lived and no crop grew but only herds of sheep moved slowly followed by lazy patient Mexicans who packed their tents on burros and lived in the hills for months. Two or three times during the day he saw sheep in the distance but for the most part he was companioned only by slow-wheeling hawks and buzzards courting the sun and blue-tailed lizards that darted across the trail. It looked like a land that had never changed and never would and there seemed to be so much of it.

If a man jogged many days over little red hills he would begin to think the world was made of them and crowds and cities were a dream.

Harms had told him these red sandstone hills worked a drowsy spell on men—had a theory that was one reason why the Southwest was such a lazy land. Red was supposed to be stimulating but the soft sunwarm red of these hills lulled the mind like the glow of dying fire. . . . He began to believe he was feeling the spell himself. At least he got sleepier with every mile he rode and things he tried to think about became remote and unimportant, until the images died in his mind and he submitted to sun and silence and the drag of his destiny. The answer to all questions here seemed to be "What of it?"

Late in the afternoon he dropped over a ridge into the mouth of a wide canyon. Red hills here rose into mountains without much changing their character. Red rock rimmed them in high broken walls fringed with dark timber. Down in the bottom a clear blue stream ran through a narrow strip of green farmland. He saw a few brown flat adobe houses and then rode through a scattering town of maybe a hundred people with a small adobe church and a large frame store. A few men, some Mexican and some white, sat on the porch of the store and talked and a few more pitched horse-shoes in the shade of cottonwood

trees, swinging their arms with the long lazy movement which makes of quoits the ideal game for gifted loafers. Peaceful and drowsy they all seemed as though they had all stared at red hills too long to care what happened next.

It was near sunset when he rode through the town but he had six miles more to ride to Bullard's ranch. The ranger station was somewhere near it, but he had been told to stop at the ranch because Lynch, the ranger, was up in the high mountains on a fire look-out. The dry spell made it necessary to keep a man there all the time. He was to spend the night at Bullard's and then go up to relieve Lynch. His job would be to sit on a mountain and watch for fires as long as the dry spell lasted. It promised to be a lonely job, yet it had a certain pull for him. That was one thing he had always wanted to do—live alone in a wilderness like all those storied fellows who had found the way. Not for a year without seeing a face like some of the men Uncle Alec had told him about, but long enough to see what solitude tasted like.

The canyon was narrow at Bullard's with just a strip of pasture along the creek. A long low house made of soft buff water-stained rock stood under mountain willows that striped its walls with shadow, and the red-stemmed pines came down the mountain behind it. Near the house was a low log barn crowned with yellowing hay and

a high-walled circular corral of bleached bonelike aspen poles with a snubbing post in the center—a typical horse corral. He knew the Bullards raised horses.

When he knocked the door was opened by a young man who made him feel little. This fellow was well over six feet and heavy-set, with curly blond hair and eyes that shone bright blue out of a face weathered red. He was an unmistakably horsey-looking man with his high-heeled boots and his leather stomacher such as bronco-riders wear to brace them against the stiff-legged shock of fighting horseflesh. His features were handsome but heavy and they matched his slow thick drawling speech.

"I'm Jim Bullard," he said in reply to Alec's inquiries. "The old man's in Albuquerque. He ain't been so well this year. Put your horse in the corral. We'll be having supper pretty soon." He turned and spoke to someone in the house. "Ma, here's that government man Lynch said was coming."

They ate in a long bare room with unplastered walls, antlers over a wide stone fireplace, Winchesters stacked in a corner and saddles piled on the floor—a room evidently ruled by men where women just were tolerated.

The two women who laid the table and sat down with them to eat were a puzzle to Alec. Ma

Bullard proved to be a fat middle-aged dark brown Mexican woman with a hospitable smile but little and broken English. Obviously she couldn't be Bullard's mother. Alec decided she must be a stepmother. The younger woman Bullard introduced as his cousin and her name was Bullard too, but she looked almost as Mexican as Ma. Her English was of the Texan variety but her skin was olive and her hair thick black and straight. She was tall and slim, gracefully erect like an Indian, with a narrow handsome face, but she was not a gracious presence. She barely nodded to Alec and waited on the table with a swift silent scornful efficiency that seemed to carry some kind of a protest in every gesture.

They had fried trout fresh from the creek, potatoes boiled in their jackets, large yellow heavy biscuits, a white thick gravy made with bacon grease and flour and for dessert a gooseberry pie which surprised by being good.

Little was said during the meal and they asked him no questions. Bullard and the old woman seemed to accept him with calm good humor, without feeling any interest or curiosity. He glanced up and met the girl's eyes once, but she immediately looked away again. She gave the impression of being deeply and unhappily preoccupied.

The unembarrassed silence of these people was strange to Alec after the storms of frenzied lo-

quacity he had weathered, and it was strange also to be in a world where women were drudges instead of charmers. Ma was slatternly in a soiled apron and the girl wore a faded blue cotton dress and black cotton stockings. Somehow those cotton stockings on a woman young and pretty seemed more than anything else to mark this as a place that belonged to the past. In New York even factory girls found silk for their legs.

After the meal the women went into the kitchen and rattled dishes while he and Bullard sat lordly on the porch and smoked. Alec felt good, pleasantly wearied by long rocking in the saddle, glad of his supper and his pipe. He was glad too that nobody would ask him if he was interested in Indians or try to tell him what was the matter with his soul. A little quiet was welcome for a change and even a little dullness, but the appeal of the place went deeper than that. As he sat listening to the chuckle of the creek and the tonkle of a distant horse-bell he felt unexpectedly at home, as though he had come back to some place he had lived in long ago and almost forgotten.

Bullard began to talk of horses and weather and hunting, assuming that Alec knew all about these things. He plainly took his guest for a man of his own kind and Alec was pleased by this. He was willing to be that kind of a man for a while and for a change. He felt there were large areas

of his being that Bullard would hardly understand but he was glad to leave them unexplored. It was a relief to be with a person simpler than himself instead of one bewilderingly more complex. He knew that his well-worn khaki and his sunburn and above all his Texas drawl made him seem the man Bullard thought he was. Without consciously trying he found himself speaking just a little more in the Texas manner than he usually did. He was not in the least acting a part. He was just falling into one that seemed inexplicably familiar.

Bullard wanted no news from anywhere else. He did not ask Alec where he had come from or what he had done. Gradually Alec came to understand that this man's imagination did not go beyond the mouth of the canyon in one direction nor the top of the divide in the other. What he wanted to talk about was his own little mountain world and the great things he had done there. He had taken over this ranch when a drunken owner had left it a wreck and he had made it pay. Alec was not much interested at first but as Bullard went on with his slow drawling story he finally overcame his listener's indifference by the force of his own deep absorbed satisfaction in the work of his hands. He made Alec realize the pleasure a man might take in catching and taming a six-year-old stallion that had run wild on the range all his life, out of harrowing a bit of wild ground and

sowing it with timothy, out of splitting great pine stumps with a mallet and wedge to get a rich winter store of pitch pine for an open hearth. In fact, before Bullard was done Alec felt as though his own hands itched for some such solid undeniable conquest over beast and earth and timber.

Horses were Bullard's specialty and when Alec mentioned that he would need a horse himself the other at once became all business.

"Lemme sell you a real horse," he urged. "You know we've got the best stock in the state—some blooded Morgans and some Kentucky trotting stock and the rest out of native mares by a registered Morgan stud. We've got sixty head of saddle stock. Come on down to the pasture and I'll show you the few I've got at the ranch.

"I'll make you a dirt cheap price," he went on as they walked, "I've got to work off some of this stuff and there ain't no market for a good horse in this country any more. . . . All the money's in beef."

"Why do you raise horses then?" Alec wanted to know.

"Well, you see, all this blooded stuff was wished on me along with the ranch. I'd rather handle horses than eat, but I would never have brought no blooded stock into this country. The feller that did it was a lunger from Kentucky, named McSween. He come in here twenty-five years ago or

more with a string of these high-steppers and about four barrels of fine rye whiskey and a pretty wife and built him this house to live in. He put blooded cattle on the range too, black poled Angus. They was pretty as deer when they was fat but a lot of 'em died in the deep snow. He lost horses too. They didn't know how to forage and the mountain lions got fat on his hundred-dollar colts. In fact that feller just naturally lost everything but his shirt and he was as sure to do it as a tadpole is to lose his tail. He didn't rightly belong in a place like this. He was an educated feller with a wagonload of books and he knowed so much you couldn't learn him nothing. His head was already full, I reckon. He cut a pretty figger for a while, him and his wife and their visitors, riding up and down the canyon on their high horses and their little saddles. He had a pack of hounds and they used to chase bobcats and lions and hardly ever catch 'em. . . . As time went on and the ranch went to pieces he give more and more of his attention to that fine whiskey of his'n. He believed it was a cure for the bugs and he did get over them all right, according to what I hear, but he lost most of his stock and his wife went off and left him and for years he was living here alone with one old Mexican to do for him. He went on some of the biggest busts a man ever lived through. Especially in winter when he got lone-

some and when he ought to have been out riding the range he'd drink himself blind. People that went by his house would see him walking up and down in the long front room there, and they say he'd holler and laugh like a crazy man all night long. Then he'd sleep a few days and come out with his face fishbelly white, what of it wasn't covered with whiskers, and his hands so shaky he couldn't light a pipe. Once or twice he went to shooting pink alligators and things and they had to lock him up.

"The Mexicans didn't mind him—they would steal his beef and look after him when he was drunk—but he become a nuisance to the ranch people—him and all his critters. His hounds run wild as wolves and used to kill game and even live-stock until the ranchers killed them. What of his horses didn't die got used to the range and they was wild as deer and about twice as fast as anything else in the country. The bunch was led by a big black stallion, the finest-looking animal you ever see, and he got to be a regular pest. He wanted every mare he seen and when he got in with somebody's saddle mare on the range he would run her off and she would join his bunch and be just as wild and hard to catch as the others. He was so wise he'd break down a fence around an oat field and let his whole bunch in, and he'd stand guard on a hilltop. If arey man came along he'd

whistle and snort and round up his herd and be gone to the hills with 'em. . . . This feller McSween was the only one that could get anywhere near them horses. He used to give 'em salt every month or so and they say the whole bunch would come right up to him and even let him put a hand on 'em. I don't know whether that's true or not, but it might have been, because he'd been salting them all their lives. Anyways, he never laid rope nor leather on arey one of 'em and he swore nobody else would. But finally the ranch people served notice on him that if he didn't take that stallion offen the range they would—with a rifle if necessary. . . . You know, a man hates to shoot a horse. It's the next thing to shooting a man, and worse in a way because a horse can't shoot back, but it looked like shooting was the only way to get shed of that stallion. He couldn't be caught. They could catch a few of his mares, but he'd soon have others. . . . Well, two or three different men said they was gonna kill that stallion the first chance they got. McSween swore nobody was gonna touch him and that he'd kill the first man that tried. It seemed like he took pleasure in just seeing them horses run wild and have everything their own way. . . . Nobody knows exactly what happened but somebody must have laid for the bunch when McSween went to salt them, and there was some shooting. The stal-

lion wasn't killed, but McSween was. They found him lying there with a bag of salt in one hand and a rifle in the other and a bullet hole through his head. The ground around him was all tromped to pieces by running horses and they never found a trace of the man that did the shooting. Maybe nobody looked very hard. . . . After that lots of people tried to catch that stallion and his bunch but it couldn't be done. He'd round up his mares and drive 'em into high country where a man couldn't follow. It seemed like he had almost human intelligence, the way he handled his bunch. The Mexicans even got so they believed the ghost of McSween guided that horse. Yessir, that's what they believed—that a phantom wrangler was astraddle of that stallion whenever he was chased. I reckon if the truth be told a lot of white people believed it, too, because chasing him wasn't popular after McSween was killed. . . ."

"What became of him?" Alec wanted to know.

"I don't know. He had disappeared by the time I got hold of the ranch. I rounded up all the rest of the horses with McSween's brand on 'em, and believe me, it was some job. I've been fighting 'em now for three years and I've got most of 'em broke. The only trouble is there ain't no market for 'em."

It was easy to see that Bullard took a deep pride in having caught and mastered this wild

herd but Alec missed the chance to compliment him because he was still thinking of McSween, who had sworn no man would lay rope or leather upon his horses. For some reason he couldn't understand the story of McSween made a powerful impression on his imagination and so did that weird notion of a wild stallion ridden by a ghost. It made him think of Alla Maya. She would have said it was true. He remembered too Uncle Alec telling him horses were aware of things lost to the senses of men. Horses were always staring at nothing a man could see and cocking their ears at sounds no man could hear. And they could travel in the dark and never get lost and they remembered a place or a man as long as they lived. . . . Well, there was more to a horse than met the eye. . . . Obscurely he could understand how a man marooned in a place like this might come to love horses better than men and abet them in a revolt against human domination.

In the pasture Bullard walked up to a red bay mare with black stockings and a white blaze in her face. She let him lay a hand on her neck without moving, staring at the two with great soft brown eyes that mirrored their faces.

"Here's the horse you want," he told Alec. "Six years old and sound all over and a regular pet. I'll sell her for a hundred and twenty-five though I shouldn't."

"That's more than I've got any business to pay," said Alec, looking at the mare with covetous eyes. She was at least two hands higher than the ponies he had been riding and she made them seem badly designed and unfinished. Her straight wide-set forelegs, the smooth round taper of her bright red barrel, her high short-coupled back and the full arch of her neck seemed the essentials of an equine perfection. He would not have altered any line by so much as an inch. She had the long full mane and tail of a range-raised horse and they gave her a wild look, suggesting the hair of Indian and Gypsy women.

"We call her Fox," Bullard said. "She's marked and colored almost like one."

"She's a peach," Alec conceded as they walked slowly back toward the house. He knew he didn't need that horse and couldn't afford her and also knew he would no longer be satisfied with anything less splendid. Bullard seemed to know it too.

"I'll tell you what to do," he said. "You take that mare and ride her for a week. At the end of that time you can either bring her back or give me a hundred dollars. I wouldn't make no such offer to most men, but I can see you know horses."

Alec laughed, feeling at once pleased and guilty.

"I can see you know how to sell them," he said.

Chapter Eleven

HIS tall bay mare seemed to endow him with a new dignity and power. She lifted him so high, she moved so smoothly, her steady pull on the bit gave such a sure pleasant feeling of speed and power in reserve and wholly in his control. He sat erect and looked around him proudly. He would have looked down upon a man riding a little horse with pure and perfect snobbery. When he came to an open stretch beside the creek he chirruped to the mare, loosed the rein and pressed his heels against her. She shot forward in a fine reaching gallop that flattened into a dead run, level as the flight of a quail. He brought her down to a jog again, and she moved more freely, warmed and excited. They knew each other better too. He was supremely pleased and also wholly absorbed. He was nothing now but a man on a horse and that, for the moment, was all he asked to be.

His way led straight up the canyon toward the heart of the mountains. As far as Bullard's there had been a dirt road that a car might have traveled, though few apparently did so, but here was only a rutty wagon track and presently that de-

generated into a trail. At the same time the canyon narrowed, the red-pillared sunlit dignity of open pine forest gave way to dark crowded spruce and the creek quickened into white flashes of riffle and cataract and lifted its voice to a shriller note.

He liked this wildness. It gave him an exploratory thrill to be leaving all traces of civilization behind, pushing his way against a dark wall of mountain. . . . It struck him, looking back, that ever since leaving New York he had been running like a fugitive farther and farther from the crowded center of life—from city to large town and from large town to small and now he seemed to be riding through a narrow gap into the heart of solitude. He became aware too, in this retrospective moment, how his travels seemed to carry him back in time. Santa Fe and Taos looked just like places Uncle Alec had described except for the cars and the artists and neither of these seemed to belong—especially those funny people. Harms looked like a man in a bad disguise poking around in a place where he had no business. . . . And that little town in the mouth of the canyon—it was simply a left-over from the old days. . . . Bullard and his women too. They were behind the times as sure as they were behind the mountains. . . . Well, he couldn't get much farther back than he was going now. The first man that ever rode up this canyon must have seen just about what he

saw—the same wilderness of rock and spruce and falling water.

He picked up a blazed trail he had been told to follow, left the creek and began to climb steeply up the mountainside, stopping now and then to let the mare blow, her red flanks darkly streaked with sweat and working like a bellows. Through openings in thick timber he glimpsed now and then a bare summit far above him, which was evidently his destination. There, he reflected with mingled curiosity and misgiving, he was probably doomed to sit for days and maybe weeks.

He came out of the woods finally upon a level open place of about a hundred acres that lay at the foot of the mountain's last sharp skyward lift. Back of it the peak was steep, and bare except for a great slide of shattered granite that looked as though it might have fallen yesterday, because not a tree or a bush found foothold upon it. All around the open grew stunted dark spruce forest, the ground under the trees littered with white dead timber, killed in the struggle for sun. Trees at the edge of the forest were bent and twisted by the wind and the weight of heavy snows that lay here all winter. The whole place had a desolate tumbled unfinished look, as though mountains here had dared to rise too high, had fallen and shattered, lost most of their life in an unsuccessful struggle with cold and snow.

A man might want to climb that peak but he would not want to stop there long. It had a hostile look and so had the dark damp woods, but there was something inviting about the little park-like open place that lay at the foot of the rockslide, like a zone of truce between the timber trying to climb the mountainside and the broken rock charging down. It was level and green and sprinkled with wild flowers. There was a spring in it somewhere and a thin bright trickle of water led off toward a dark cleft that marked the beginning of a canyon. It was a bit of smooth sunwarm earth set here at the very summit of the world, where rivers are born and life reaches nearest to the sky. It looked inhabitable and evidently someone at some time had tried to prove it so, for a log cabin with a fallen roof stood near its center. Over at one side, on a slight rise, stood a little white tent, and as he drew near this Alec saw a man come out of the timber with an armful of wood. He threw this down beside the tent and came to meet his visitor.

"I'm sure glad to see you!" Lynch said when they had exchanged greetings. "Picket your horse, or hobble her if you think she'll stay. I was just about to cook."

Lynch was a short dark man with little neck but a great deal of chest and shoulder. His ruddy

face was covered with thick black whiskers, and his teeth shone through them in a hospitable grin.

"I hope for your sake it rains pretty soon," he remarked as he sliced fat bacon and threw it into a skillet. "This is a hell of a place for a man to live. There ought to be a good cabin, but there ain't. You can try to live in that ruin if you want to. I tried it a few nights, but what's left of the roof is mostly leaks. The place is full of chipmunks all day and pack rats all night. They gnaw your boots and eat your grub and run over your face when you're asleep. Now and then a porkypine or a skunk comes along for a change. I killed a skunk right by the door one night. That's one reason I moved out. You better stick to the tent, is my advice. It don't give you much room to move around at night but at least you'll have it to yourself and it'll keep you dry when the rain hits—if it ever does. . . . You understand, if a good hard rain falls you can come back to headquarters, but not until then. . . . I'm off for town myself and damned glad to be going. My wife's down there, about to have a baby, and that's on my mind, but even if I felt easy I couldn't like this place. It's too damned high and lonesome and there's nothing to look at but rock and spruce and nothing to do but set and look at it. I guess I've spent as much time alone in the mountains as any man my age but this is one time I got a bellyfull. I don't

see how anybody ever thought he wanted to live here. . . ."

"Why? . . . did somebody live here?" Alec asked, as he began unsaddling his mare.

"Sure they did . . . leastways they tried to. It's getting so there ain't a piece of level ground anywhere but what somebody'll try to worry a living out of it. Look at them dry farmers down on the flats. Every dry year about a thousand of 'em starve out and leave and as sure as it rains again, a thousand new suckers come in. It'll soon be so if a feller wants to get off by himself he'll have to dig a hole and crawl in. . . . I suppose when airplanes gets to working good there'll be people living all over places like this. . . . Well here's a good one to fly away from—I'll say that for it."

He laughed and Alec joined in, not too heartily.

He could see that Lynch had an appetite for talk like a starved man for food. His words came in a breathless rush, driven by the pressure of long solitude. Alec was minded to keep him going.

"A man certainly couldn't farm up here," he remarked. "How did the fellow that built that cabin make a living?"

"I think it was built by an old man that had a mine up on the mountain there. You can still see his shaft. Anyway, I know he lived up here most of the time for several years, working alone with

a pick and shovel and windlass. He had good samples to show and several times he had a chance to sell but he always backed out at the last minute. He was kind of cracked, like most of those fellows that stays alone too long, and he couldn't make up his mind to part with his prospect. God knows how he lived but he died up here one winter and they found what the coyotes and rats had left of him next spring. His claim turned out to be no good after all—just a pocket. . . . After that a young feller and his wife came up here with a bunch of cattle and they spent one winter too. They got the flu and she died. He buried her in the snow till he was able to travel. Then he brought her out on a packhorse, stiff as a board. Pretty tough—hey? That was about five years ago and there ain't been nobody here since then except a fireguard in the fire season, but I'll bet somebody else'll try to live here yet. There must be a jinx on the place, but that won't keep the fools away.

"You didn't bring a gun along, did you?" he asked as he divided bacon and fried potatoes on two tin plates. "Well, I'll leave you my thirty-thirty. You ain't likely to need it but it's a good idea for you to have some kind of a gun. There's a bear up on the mountain here, and he comes down almost every night. I've never seen him but I've found his tracks time and again. He

used to walk around the tent three or four times every night—trying to figure out what it was, I guess. You might see him and take a crack at him if you want to. For my part I never shoot a bear unless I have to. He looks too much like a man when he's skinned. In fact I never killed but one bear and I'm willing for him to be the last."

"That bear must have made a bad impression on you," Alec suggested.

"Well, you might call it that," Lynch assented. "It was just after I was married and I got a job as government trapper—predatory animal extermination, Biological Survey. I guess you've heard about it. To hold your job you've got to show some fur, and I had to hold mine. They sent me up in the Cubero country where a bear had been killing sheep. The Mexican sheep-herders was scared of him. They're all scared of bears. This one would follow a herd around and kill whenever he got hungry. As soon as the Mexicans showed me one of his kills I could see by his tooth-marks he was an old one. Sheep-killers nearly always are—too old and lazy to grub for ants and wild onions. This fellow was a black but nearly as big as a grizzly. . . . I trailed him around for days without getting a sight of him and he was too wise to walk into a trap. I got so I knew him like an old friend—all his little habits and hang-outs—but I didn't get a shot at him for a week.

Finally I laid by the carcass of a sheep he had killed all one night and he come along with the first gray light in the morning. He rose up on his hind legs at the edge of the open and stood there like a nearsighted old gent, peering around and sniffing the air. He was suspicious and wouldn't come no closer. The light was so dim I couldn't get a good bead, but I finally let him have it right in the big middle. Well sir, he dropped down on all fours and went to rampsing around in circles, roaring and tearing up dirt and brush, biting the place he was hit. He shore did hate to die. I plugged him twice more and then he went tearing off through the timber making as much noise as a runaway team. I took his trail as soon as good light come and it was easy to follow because he was shot through the lung and coughing up blood as he went. It was a caution how that brute could travel with one lung punctured and two other holes in him some place. . . . I finally seen him clear across a canyon and shot at him a couple of times but he went on into thick spruce. It was late then and I had only a few shells left but I knew he was hard hit and I figured I better stay with him and finish him. By the time I got across the canyon it was near sunset. I seen him again hobbling off into the timber and I shot every shell I had, hoping to stop him. By good luck the last shot broke his back. He jest set down on his rump

with his front legs spraddled and his tongue hanging out and there he was. I couldn't finish him but I knew he didn't have long to live, and I couldn't get back to camp that night noways, so I built a fire and jest set and watched him. I could see his eyes shining green in the dark and hear him breathing loud with his punctured lung. He seemed to be a powerful long time about dying. It was a little too much like setting at a bedside waiting for a human to die. But finally I heard him give his last cough and gasp and his green eyes went out and he struggled in the dirt a little and give it up. I went over and poked him with a stick and he was dead all right. I made a fire right beside him and set up against him all night and his fur kept me right warm. Next morning I managed to get him hung up and skinned, and I was hungry enough by that time to eat anything. I cut a chunk of meat offen his ham and broiled it over the coals. Jest as I was starting to eat it I happened to look around at him hanging there and he looked so damned much like a dead Mexican, it turned my stummick. I jist naturally puked all over that mountain, and I ain't et no bear meat since then. Nossir, a bear looks too much like a man and he kind of acts like one too. . . ."

"I guess I won't bother that bear unless he bothers me," Alec said, after a pause.

"He ain't agonna bother you," Lynch assured him. "A bear never bothers nobody."

When they had finished their supper it was dark. They piled small spruce logs on the fire and sat with their backs to a large rock, pipes going well. The night was cold but they were warm between rock and fire.

Alec felt as though he and Lynch had become good friends in a few hours. The immense emptiness around them seemed to push them together, making the mere fact that both of them were human a bond of the strongest kind, just as the great dead silence of the night seemed to give all speech a new and thrilling value.

Lynch stretched his legs and puffed his pipe.

"This don't seem so bad now that I've got company," he said. "Likely as not, when I've been down in town a while, I'll get to wishing I was back up here. That's the way it's always been with me. I've been trying to live in town ever since I was fourteen years old, and I never could get really used to it, but now I got a wife and a kid coming and I reckon I got to get used to it. I reckon it's a good thing for me too. If I had got married years ago I might have been more use to myself and other people."

Alec saw revelations coming, groped for words that might encourage them.

"I don't see why you should live in town if you

don't like it," he remarked. "Why don't you get a ranch and settle down out here?"

"Well that might be all right if I could settle down," Lynch agreed. "But the trouble is I always want to travel. I growed up on a ranch over in the San Juan country and when I was a kid I jest run wild out there. They never sent me to school till I was twelve years old, and I didn't like it then. I was bigger than any of the other kids for one thing and I felt like a fool setting there at a desk with a lot of little runts. I used to run away all the time and I never learned much. Then they put me to work in a blacksmith shop and I learned the trade all right. I'm a pretty good mechanic when I put my mind on it. But I was always getting restless and throwing up my job. If it was winter I'd generally go trapping and in summer I'd get a job with a sheep or cattle outfit or go prospecting if I could get anybody to back me. There was still some prospecting done in them days. It wasn't really nothing but an excuse to loaf and fish and live in the hills."

"You must have had some pretty good times," Alec suggested.

"I did have some good times," Lynch agreed. "After I'd been holding a job for a while, going down to work every day from nine to five, taking a lot of lip off some goddam boss, I'd get a hankering to go that was jest more than I could stand.

When I'd first get out in the mountains again I'd feel so good I'd holler and sing for days. But after I'd been going alone for a few weeks or maybe a month I'd always begin hating myself as if I was my own worst enemy. You don't know how that is unless you've tried it. . . . Soon or late I'd have to go back and hunt me another job and start all over. I wasn't getting nowhere. I'd always get to courting same gal in town, too, and pretty soon she'd begin hinting around about marriage and I'd always say to myself, No you don't, baby. I couldn't see myself tied to a skirt. I'd generally have a fuss with her and that would be about time to blow. . . . Finally about two years ago I met this gal I married. I met her out in the mountains and maybe that made a difference, but she was different too. Anyways, we got hooked and I had to stick at something. I couldn't get no job in town that paid nothing and that's when I took that trapping job. I tried again and again to get something in town, but the best paying thing I could get was this job of being a ranger. I don't know any of the stuff these young college fellows gets out of books, but I know livestock and timber. This job is mainly keeping sheep off the range and managing timber sales and I'm good at that, if I do say it. So here I am out in the hills and the wife down there in the hospital. It seems like some such job as this is all I'm fit for now. I'm worth

more out here than I can ever be worth in town, but this ain't no place for a woman. I'd like to live in town so Bessie could go to the movies and all like that and maybe have a car if I could ever make money enough. And in a few years that kid will have to go to school. Take it from me he's gonna have all the learning there is. He ain't gonna be no such ignorant bum as I am!"

Lynch spoke these last words with a bitter emphasis and then fell into a deep silence that Alec felt powerless to break. They both sat staring at the fire for a while. Finally Lynch rose and walked about looking at the sky.

"Clear as ever!" he remarked. "In these dry spells it always gets to seem as if it never will rain again. And ain't it still? This here is the stillest place I ever camped in, except when the wind blows through the spruce and then you can hear all night that groaning sound it makes when dead timber rubs against live. When there's a good steady wind it sounds as if the whole forest was breathing and groaning in its sleep. . . . Well, I'll go up the mountain a little ways and take a look around. You always want to do that last thing at night and first thing in the morning."

Chapter Twelve

THE next morning Lynch took him up on top of the mountain and showed him how to locate a fire, if he saw one, by setting a needle on a map so that it pointed the exact direction.

"There's supposed to be a phone line up here," he explained. "But there ain't because the snow broke it down last winter and they never got it fixed. If you see a fire you spot it as well as you can. If it's just a little smoke you go down and look at it, put it out if you can with the shovel and axe. If anything big gets started you can ride down and tell Bullard. Everybody has to turn out and fight a fire. Bullard will help you organize an outfit and hire men. In fact, you can jest about leave it to him."

After a few more instructions, Lynch rode away. With the binoculars which were part of his equipment Alec could follow the dwindling figure of the horseman for a mile or so and then it was lost in thick timber.

For a while he was deeply interested in the view from his vantage point. He could look for great distances in all directions over a country of

high forested mesas and deep blue gorges. To the South he could see level land and the broken glint of a river and the pale silhouette of other mountain ranges far beyond. He knew there were ranches and even towns in that vastness. Thousands of men moved about in it somewhere, but not a single unmistakable sign of human life could he see. Even when he studied it with the binoculars, although he could descry a few moving dots that looked like cattle or horses on the range and a faint patterning of distant flat-lands that suggested plowed fields and fences, the general effect remained one of complete and silent desolation.

Staring at it was an occupation that soon palled. The longer he looked the more it bored him. It was like some great sightless imperturbable face, unchanging and unresponsive. He longed for something to happen, for something to do.

By noon he was wishing earnestly that there might be a fire. He remembered Uncle Alec's description of a great forest fire in the early days in California when no one thought of trying to check it. Flames roared across mountains before a high wind in a path miles wide, creeping through deep-laid pine needles, leaping from crown to crown of spruce and pine. It covered the country with a black fog and at night it stained the sky dull red. The air was full of frightened birds and all kinds of wild animals fled down the mountain slopes and

into the valleys—wild cats, mountain lions, wide-antlered, high-bouncing bucks, grizzly bears with their fur on fire—running before a running wall of pitchy smoke and crimson fire. That would be something to see. . . . And he was pleased by the notion of himself, too, as a courier of catastrophe, riding hard on his swift mare to give the alarm, calling out excited men, organizing, leading, on his high horse commanding. . . .

But in the wide peacefulness before him no smoke showed. And if it did it would doubtless be at first only a wisp from some campfire forgotten by a sheep-herder. His duty would be to ride down and see what it was, perhaps extinguish it laboriously and alone with a shovel and an axe. There was little hope that a million dollar holocaust would come along to brighten his life.

The only other chance of change was rain. Late in the afternoon a few clouds gathered in the east, but that happened almost every day, and they never rose and covered the sky. He heard thunder but it was far away and faint. The late summer rains were long overdue and he knew heavy storms might begin any day, yet somehow they seemed a remote possibility. It was hard to imagine black clouds covering that huge immaculate sky, storm daring to shatter that impressive silence.

As evening approached lengthening shadows slowly changed the look of the country, deepening

and darkening the canyons and gorges. At five o'clock he decided to call it a day's work. He was supposed to spend most of his time on the mountain-top but he had to go down to cook his meals and look after his horse, and he was eager for movement and occupation.

He took the rifle Lynch had left him and set out to investigate his surroundings before darkness tied him to fire and tent. With some curiosity he peered into the ruined cabin that stood in the center of the open. At one end the roof had fallen but at the other a stone chimney supported it and made the place after a fashion habitable. The interior was dim and had a musty repellent smell. He had noticed before that after days of life in the open air any kind of human habitation, even though long deserted, seemed to stink. This one evidently had been used by a good many campers for a night of shelter. The ground outside bore the back scars of many camp fires and inside the floor was strewn with tin cans, bits of cloth and leather, scraps of paper—the characteristic debris of the one animal that litters the earth wherever he goes. In a corner lay a pile of old newspapers and magazines and he pounced upon these eagerly. He never read much and he had not thought of bringing along anything to read but now a printed page—anything articulate and possibly diverting—seemed suddenly valuable. He

found a few copies of a magazine of adventure stories, several of a theatrical publication filled with pictures of bare-shouldered smiling girls, and several old paper novels of a kind once common but now rare. "Lady Audley's Secret" was one of them and "Twenty Tales by Twenty Women" was another.

While he was bundling up his find he discovered a shriveled high-heeled scrap of a woman's shoe. He picked this up and stood staring at it for several minutes. It was probably all that remained up here of the one woman who had tried to patronize this mountain, to pat it on the head and call it home. It gave him a sudden vivid presentiment of death. If he had picked up a human skull he would not have felt more uncomfortable. . . . Death he hardly ever thought of because he was so much alive but now he felt as though he stood in the presence of death. The cabin was a tomb. It smelt of death. What had lived here the mountain had crushed and killed. . . . He went outside quickly and stood in front of the door gulping deep breaths of fresh living air. . . . Grass and flowers and sunshine reassured him in a moment. Everything out there was alive and so was he. Death he could not long believe in. He laughed at himself and went his way.

With nearly two hours of daylight still before him he followed the rill which led from his spring

down toward a deep canyon. Within a mile he came to a larger stream, and this struck him as a valuable addition to his simple premises. It was small enough to step across in spots but where a thick spruce had fallen in the water it formed a pool four feet deep. He promised himself a chilly bath, but not now—some time in the middle of the day when the sun was strong. He saw a trout rise and neatly nip a moth off the smooth surface of the water and wondered whether there was any fishing tackle in the tent. To catch and cook a fish would be a large event in such a life as this.

As he walked back up the canyon in the still deep coolness and softened light of evening he felt alert and interested. The boredom and sleepiness of his long day on the mountain were gone. He was aware again of that atmosphere of secrecy and promise which he had felt more than once in the forest when he was cruising timber.

The gun in his hand felt good—not because he was afraid of anything, but because it made him a formidable fellow, a figure of potential drama. Instinctively he began watching the ground for tracks and soon he found where a deer had walked down the dim trail, turned off toward the creek and deeply imprinted its sharp heart-shaped spoor on a bit of damp ground while it drank. The deer season was closed and he was a sworn guardian of the law but he resisted a strong feral impulse to

follow the track just for the sake of following it. There was something about this place that made him feel like a hound or a wolf. His senses seemed abnormally keen and expectant. He walked on slowly and quietly, stopping to look and listen. . . . Something ought to appear, something ought to happen. . . . Several times small creatures rustled in the spruce, making his heart perceptibly quicken, tightening his nerves to a delicious tension of expectancy, but he failed to see anything larger than a chipmunk until he was nearly back to camp. Then he glanced up the mountainside and saw a large reddish-brown cat sitting on its haunches fifty yards away and looking at him calmly. It sat in a patch of broken sunlight which made its rich tawny fur glow as though lit by inner fire. He could see plainly the shape of its large square head with tufted ears and pointed whiskers. Its colors blended with those of rock and needle-covered earth, so that a man might easily have looked at it and passed it by, yet once it was seen it stood out with a peculiar vivid livingness.

Alec stared at it for a full minute, wholly forgetting he had a gun in his hand. The lynx presently rose and walked slowly away. It stopped once and looked back at him over its shoulder and then walked on again. Its attitude and movement seemed to express not fear but a disdainful aversion, slightly modified by a refined curiosity.

It glanced coldly and stepped aside, making him feel like an intruder in some exclusive club.

It had almost disappeared before he remembered he had a rifle. Impulsively he tossed the gun to his shoulder, took hasty unaccustomed aim and pulled the trigger.

The cat vanished like a stage rabbit at the crack of a conjurer's pistol. He did not even have the satisfaction of seeing it jump. He stood there staring at the spot where it had been, startled and surprised by the commotion of his shot. The report seemed loud enough for a cannon and it echoed again and again, back and forth and up and down the canyon as though the mountains were mocking an impudent disturber. When the sound finally died away he could hear a crack and rustle in the woods where some large beast fled and the calls of a few frightened birds. After that the silence seemed deeper than ever and it seemed reproachful, not to say ominous.

He shouldered his gun and started back toward camp. Darkness was coming on and he hurried. The farther he went the faster he traveled. He wanted to get to camp before black jaws of night swallowed him whole. He longed for the solace of food, the dumb company of fire. . . .

Chapter Thirteen

HIS second day on the mountain was decidedly his worst. It seemed to him he had never lived through such a long day nor such an empty one, and all the days he would probably have to spend there stretched out before his imagination in a prospect of unendurable monotony. He walked about restlessly, he whittled a stick, he threw pebbles at a tin can. He wondered how in hell Daniel Boone and Kit Carson put in the time when they had nowhere to go and no Indians to fight. Every little while he scanned the mountains with his glass, hoping to see a cloud of smoke or a cloud of storm, but nothing changed, nothing moved. He could not bear to contemplate an indefinite number of days like this one. He would stick it out for a while, yes, but if no rain fell in a week or at most in ten days he would ride down to headquarters and quit. It seemed to him a man might well go crazy staring at emptiness, listening to silence.

In the sleepy endless hours of the afternoon he turned to his stock of magazines and dime novels for diversion and found them a good deal worse

than useless. The adventure stories were all alike and all of them bored him. "Lady Audley's Secret" was even worse. He could not keep his mind on it. The pictures of smirking voluptuous ladies in the stage magazine proved disturbing, and "Twenty Tales by Twenty Women" was still more so.

Each of these was the story of some woman, whether wife or maid, who had sinned deliciously and come to a bad end, which was heavily loaded with moral significance. Alec was not much impressed by these moral catastrophes because they were rooted in the customs of an age he had scarcely known—an age of long skirts and accidental babies when love outside of wedlock was described as ruin and a woman's chastity was the coin that bought her bread. But the long detailed accounts of these hapless fornications worked painfully upon his idle imagination. In that inhuman desolation they had a force and suggestiveness they could not possibly have had anywhere else. They lifted a lid in his memory and peopled his solitude with figures of lust. All the women he had ever known now went prancing through his mind with a sudden unaccountable vividness.

It was not that his loves had been so many, but he remembered so much about them and they seemed so much more voluptuous now than they

had at the time. . . . Not persons he remembered, but eyes inviting, arms, legs, wet lips, the rumple of yielding skirts, the quick short gasp of answering desire. . . . And chances he had missed—they were still more disturbing. . . . A woman on a train sat opposite, crossed silken knees, looked up from a book, smiled a slow knowing smile. And he, young, foolish, too shy to speak, afraid . . . of what? . . . Nothing seemed more important now. . . . To breed and die like a honeybee. . . . To be lost in the soft warm clasp of infinite desire. . . . For this incredible moment it seemed the end and all of life.

He threw the book angrily at a chipmunk, rebelling against himself. Here alone such thoughts might drive a fellow mad. He rose and walked around, troubled. He swept a thousand empty miles with his glasses, looking for help. He longed for fire, rain—anything to break the spell his solitude had laid upon him. His feelings frightened him, filled him with the guilt that hangs about all things never said, all things that lie buried in all minds and come forth seldom except in neat disguises. . . . Was he then a being lewd beyond all measure, or did all men in such solitudes know this same torment? He remembered a terrible story someone had told around the campfire about a lone sheep herder who spent all his spare time trying to make a woman out of a side of bacon

and a bolt of calico. Just like Pygmalion and Galatea. But that was a pretty story they read aloud in high school. Still the principle was the same. And how about wood nymphs and water sprites and ladies of the lake? . . . And the sirens that sang to the sailors and the mermaids they saw in the waves? . . . Women that were only voices, women without legs . . . like the women you dreamed about, lovelier than real ones but never quite complete. . . . Hadn't men peopled all kinds of solitudes with dreams of lovely women? And he could see just how. . . . As if a nymph should pop out of that green pool down in the canyon. That was just the kind of place they were supposed to live in. A white-stemmed aspen in the dusk, shaken by the wind, could look just like a slim white naked girl—to a man who wanted to see one, to a man who believed in sprites. . . . But what of those old-timers who traveled their thousands of miles alone and lived for months without hearing a human voice? . . . Well, who knew what visions sat beside their lonely fires? They traveled like the devil and they all came home at last—except a few that found squaws and went Indian, and they were lost to civilization. Would any man ever come home except to a woman? Maybe such dreams were needed to tie men down, to make them work and breed.

They made him work. He went down off the

mountain early, took an axe and spent two hours furiously chopping wood enough to last him a week. Then he took a plunge in the deep clear pool he had found and emerged feeling pure and innocent. A whole mythology of lust had been washed out of his mind by that simple physical act. Truly, the nymphs had left him, had been lost again in the depths of a woodland pool. . . . His bath had made him ravenously hungry. He would have swapped the Queen of Sheba for a thick sirloin steak.

Next day he climbed to his lookout point with a faint fear and a strong reluctance. As long as he had something to do—wood to cut, food to cook—he was all right. But he feared those long hours of emptiness, and he dreaded the thoughts that might come and roost like buzzards with nothing to drive them away.

To his surprise his third day was easier than his second and each successive day seemed shorter than the last. Unaccountably, his mind sank into a deep and vacant calm, while at the same time he developed a technique for passing time. He read no more and had no desire to read but used the pictured charmers of the stage to start his fires and hung "Lady Audley's Secret" on a convenient bush where he unbuckled his belt every morning with chronometrical regularity.

He thought less and less—about girls or any-

thing else. He had always believed he had deep problems to consider and that if he had time and quiet he would reach important conclusions. Now that he had nothing to do but explore his mind he was surprised to find there was almost nothing in it. What had happened couldn't be helped and what was going to happen God only knew. That was the substance and summary of all his meditations. Neither past nor future seemed important here. Memories became vivid and important only when something touched them to life as that book had done. Left to themselves, memories went to sleep and so did desire—for a while at least.

He was aware of a precarious equipoise of peace. Let something come along to start him thinking, remembering, feeling and he would probably be all upset again. But nothing came and he grew skilful in finding small painless objects for his attention. Sometimes he would pick out a cloud or a mountain and stare at it for an hour until he achieved an almost hypnotic stupor. In more active moments he would focus his whole consciousness on a chipmunk foraging for wild grain or a nuthatch hunting grubs up and down a tree trunk. Each of his meals he planned with care and contemplated in long and loving anticipation. He dug a hole and cooked beans deliciously with bacon over smothered coals. He stewed dried apples and even attempted a pie. His appetite was

enormous and his digestion perfect. When he had eaten a huge meal and topped it with two cups of coffee and lay back against a rock in the sunshine with a pipe in his mouth, he reached the height of his beatitude. He forgot whether it was Tuesday or Wednesday. Space shrank to the place where he lay and time to the moment. Consciousness dwindled to a small bright warm spot and often that went out in full-fed easy sleep.

He always looked forward to the hour when he would go down off the mountain in the afternoon. Then he could walk in the canyon, take a plunge in his pool, bask in a patch of sunlight, catch a fish for his supper. And the canyon itself became steadily more interesting as he became acquainted with its inhabitants. It was to him no longer a strange place but a neighborhood. He knew familiarly a brood of half-grown grouse, learned their range and habits and went almost every day to look at them. They would fly into low branches of a tree, stretch their necks in curiosity and cluck at him, as though they were trying desperately to communicate something, to ask him whether he was friend or foe. The same squirrels and water ousels he saw every day until he felt like giving them names and greeting them. He always looked for the tracks of the deer that watered at his swimming pool and finally he saw it—a buck with six-pointed velvet antlers standing in the edge

of the timber, staring at him in poised alert surprise. He thought if it had jumped and run he might have felt like shooting but he had no desire to shoot it as it stood there. In fact he had more and more a fellow feeling for these wild things as though the longer he stayed on the mountain the more like them he became. He thought he understood how it was that Indians apologized to the game they killed and danced solemn dances in its honor.

It was only after dark that his solitude ever oppressed him any more. He was always a little lonely then, but this feeling never became acute because the darkness and the warmth of his fire always made him sleepy.

Repeatedly he had the feeling that he had been in this place before, or one just like it and this puzzled him. He felt that he could not have endured this solitude except for something familiar about it.

Now and then he remembered that he would soon be going down to headquarters, meeting people, doing new things, and he was half eager and half averse to the change. He thought of the old man who had lived on this mountain most of the time for years and had been unable to bring himself to sell his mine and go. Probably he got so he was afraid to be among people, to face the excitements of women, talk and money. Probably

any man who could stand this kind of solitude at all would tend to get that way in time. After all, people were mainly disturbing. When you backed away off and took a detached look at it, society seemed to be mostly a bore and an irritation. . . . Alec knew he was going back and he was willing to go, but he was not eager. Most of the time now he didn't especially care whether it rained or not.

Chapter Fourteen

ONE of his chief amusements as well as one of his duties was to search the country several times a day with his high-powered glasses. Whenever he discovered something that moved he would watch it with deep interest as long as he could see it. And as he learned where and when to look, he discovered more and more. He knew now that few wild things moved when the sun was high, but late in the afternoon and early in the morning he often saw deer and coyotes, sometimes miles away, and he watched every morning for a flock of wild turkeys that trotted across the bare summit of a ridge, and once when something frightened them they set their great wings and went sailing across a canyon like a fleet of airplanes. A sight like that was a thrill that lasted for hours.

In all the country he could survey there were few visible signs of human life. Small herds of cattle and horses sometimes moved along the trails or grazed in the open and several times he saw horsemen far below, going in another direction. No one ever came his way until he had been on

the mountain more than a week. Then one afternoon he glimpsed a rider crossing an open place in the pine forest far below and he knew this person must be following the trail that led to the look-out.

The discovery excited him far more than its probable significance seemed to warrant. All other creatures he had watched with a mild unconcerned interest, but this human coming his way made his heart quicken perceptibly. He focused his glasses on the next open glade the rider would strike if he continued up the trail, and while he watched his mind was full of questions. Who could it be? And on what errand? The trail led nowhere except to the lookout. Someone surely was coming for no other purpose than to see him. Was he to be relieved? Had he been fired? Had some important message for him reached headquarters?

The rider appeared again, undoubtedly following the trail to his mountain top, and his agitation became almost painful. He could hardly wait to discover who this mysterious visitant might be, what brought him here. And yet he was aware of something like a resentment. . . . He resented the invasion of his peace and privacy, the disturbance of his carefully-cultivated self-sufficient calm. . . .

When he saw that the rider would soon reach his camp at the foot of the mountain he could

contain himself no longer but went running down the trail.

The way led through a narrow gulley, so that he lost sight of his camp until he emerged in the open space at the foot of the mountain. Then, to his amazement, he found it empty as ever. He stood watching for some minutes, thinking perhaps he had miscalculated the distance and the rider had not arrived. But still no one appeared. Could he have imagined that figure? He ran across the open and studied the trail where it emerged from the open. Tracks told the story. Someone had ridden to the edge of the timber, stopped, looked, turned and gone back the way he had come.

The unmistakable record of this strange behavior heightened his agitation into something like anger. He went and threw the saddle on his mare, jerking the cinches tight with nervous haste. He would find out what this meant! Down the trail he went in a hard gallop, as though he were in hot pursuit of a criminal.

He came up with the rider suddenly as he rounded a clump of spruce and almost sat his horse on her haunches in a quick stop.

Silent with surprise, he observed that his mysterious visitor was a woman—a dark slim girl, bareheaded, wearing a blue gingham blouse and riding trousers. At first he did not know her. Then

he recognized the girl from the Bullard ranch—the one who had glowered at him the night he stopped there.

They exchanged surprised, slightly embarrassed greetings.

"Were you looking for me?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I was just out for a ride. I didn't know this trail went to the lookout."

She smiled at him and then giggled. She was not at all the haughty, silent person he remembered meeting at the ranch, but timid, uneasy and a little shy. Each of them was excessively eager to explain to the other how he happened to be there.

"I thought it might be someone looking for me," Alec said. "Some important message. . . ."

"No," she repeated. "I was just out riding. I hardly ever get a chance. I guess I went too far." She giggled again.

"Do you like to ride?" Alec asked, laboring to make conversation.

"I'm crazy about it!" she said, warming a little. "But I hardly ever get a chance to go. Jim says it isn't safe for a woman to ride around alone, but that's nonsense. Whenever he's away, if there's a horse in the corral, I just saddle and go."

They rode in silence, Alec looking at her steadily, she stealing side glances at him. He was wondering what her visit meant. Was it really accidental? Or had she known he was there, come to

look for him? It tickled his vanity to think she might have remembered him and felt an interest. And yet it also annoyed him. Here was the inevitable girl again.

She certainly hadn't shown any interest in him that evening at the ranch. And he hadn't felt any either. But he was interested now—almost tremulously so—and he knew it was only because he hadn't seen a woman in so long. She had him at a disadvantage and her sly glance told him that she knew it.

If she had been among a hundred he might never have looked at her twice, but now he stared at her as though she had been the only woman on earth. As far as he was concerned at the moment, she was. . . . He felt like a fool riding along with her, unable to think of a thing to say, and yet he hated to let her out of his sight.

She was just as hard up for conversation as he was, but she hummed a little tune to show she didn't mind. Alec noticed her slim brown hands on the reins, her round supple wrists. Her body was easy and erect in the saddle, with just a faint lift of breast. She held her head gracefully, like an Indian, and her brown face was finely cut. He began to think she was much better looking than he had realized. Dress her up, he reflected, and she would look smart. She had the flat supple figure they all wanted now.

Her body was much more expressive than her face. Her face was a mask. It hid more than it revealed. Yet that and her silence added to her appeal. She was something to be discovered. She aroused curiosity just as people who were always explaining themselves were sure to bore.

Their horses frisked and fought the bits, excited by each other. She fidgeted in her saddle. Their ride had an air of tension and suspense as though they moved timidly toward some climax without knowing how to reach it.

"How do you like your mare?" she asked, smiling at him sidelong.

"Fine," said Alec. "But I haven't had much chance to ride her since I came up here."

"She's fast," said the girl. "I used to ride her myself. Speed is what I like but Jim don't like for me to run his horses."

"Let's take a little lope," Alice suggested.

"All right. When we get to that flat down yander."

When they reached the edge of the open she dug heels into the gray and shot away from him, leaning forward in her saddle, laughing back over her shoulder. Alec spurred his mare and the ride became a wild chase in a dead run. He reached for the flying figure when he drew near and she leaned away and dodged his arm, laughing and lashing her pony with the long ends of the reins.

They had to pull up suddenly at a turn in the trail, their horses plowing the dirt with planted hooves and gathered haunches. They jostled together and Alec threw an arm about her, almost lifting her from the saddle. It was a gesture half intended and half accidental. She seemed to accept it at first, laughing good-humoredly. Then suddenly she twisted in his grasp, dealt him a stinging slap on the cheek and trotted away, showing him an erect and rigid back.

Alec followed slowly, red with rage and confusion. He knew he ought to hurry after, apologize—as a matter of policy if nothing else. It wouldn't do to have any misunderstandings with these people. But he was too angry to speak. He felt like whirling his horse and riding back up the mountain. Damn her anyway! Hadn't she challenged him to catch her, laughed at his efforts? What right did she have to get huffed? But his rage was really against himself. What a fool he had been to do so much as lay a hand on her!

He was just bringing himself to the point of pursuing her hat in hand with correct and diplomatic words forming on his tongue, when she looked back over her shoulder at him, face flushed and eyes shining, teeth showing in a wide smile. When he spurred to catch up with her, she was off again, her hair flying in the wind, her laugh a shriek of excitement. Again he caught her, and

again she slapped him, but this time he took the slap as a caress and they rode side by side, laughing, delighted with themselves and each other.

She was all flush and sparkle now. She looked prettier and about four times as much alive. She had lost her sullenness and her giggling ridiculous uneasiness. In flight and struggle she had suddenly acquired form and meaning like a huddled frightened bird when it takes the air.

Alec rode beside her, light and alert in his saddle, hoping she would start again. But the trail offered no opportunity for another race and they were almost down to the wagon road.

"You better go back," she warned. "No telling who we might run into here. . . ."

He nodded and grinned. Already they shared the secrecy of lovers.

"Yes. It's about time," he agreed. He threw an arm about her and aimed a kiss at her mouth which landed on her bent neck. She gave him a parting slap, and they went their separate ways. He stopped once and looked back and she laughed and waved.

He rode to camp slashing with his quirt at spruce boughs that overhung the trail, keeping his horse in a nervous prance. Would he see her again, and if so, then what? And why did girls pop up everywhere, even on mountain tops? Was he a fascinator of women or just a poor sap who

fell for every skirt that came along? He felt at once triumphant and chagrined.

What to make of his little adventure he didn't know, and neither could he guess whether it was over or just begun. But one thing was sure—it had destroyed his peace of mind. This fact he confirmed with a growing annoyance all that evening and all the next day. He no longer ate and smoked with the same profound serenity, and when he sought sleep a slim brown incubal presence followed and tormented him.

He fought against his obsessions and recovered a measure of calm, but his remaining days on the mountain were restless ones. He was always looking for something. He wondered if she would come again and watched the trail for a blue moving dot of life that never showed. He studied the clouds with a growing impatience. Rain surely could not hold off much longer now.

The third afternoon after the girl's visit it clouded suddenly and thundered close. Big drops came splashing down and he ran for camp, eager to pack and leave. But the sun glinted through the shower and it was over before it had wet the surface of the ground. He went back up the mountain, cursing. The clean bright evening sky annoyed him.

The next day was a sultry one for that altitude, even in the morning. The wind was dead so that

flies pestered him and the sun was hotter than ever before up there. It clouded slowly toward dark and when he had finished his evening meal and lay down to stare at the sky he saw no stars for the first time. He went to bed in a night still dead and black.

A tremendous rumble of thunder roused him about two in the morning. Returning consciousness banished a dream that the rockslide on the mountain was rushing down to crush him and he stuck his head out the door of the tent in fright. Another crash came closer yet. He could smell ozone in the air. A broad flash of lightning showed him a vivid glimpse of the open with his mare standing frightened, her head lifted, and the spiky tops of the spruce all around. . . . It was coming all right this time. . . . Thunder crashed again and the rain came riding a gale that seized his tent and shook it like a great angry hand.

The water fell as though from spouts. It soaked through the canvas and trickled down upon his blankets. It washed out the trenches that were supposed to protect the tent and came running under the edges making a puddle of his bed. All the time wet canvas flapped and bellied, and momentarily the lightning glared through it.

Alec piled up his bed in the middle of the tent and sat on top of it with his knees drawn up to

his chin. He felt exceedingly small and miserable but relieved that the rain had come at last.

It kept on coming without stint for most of two hours. There would be a lull and then another rush of wind and water, each of them making him fear his tent would leave him. He felt as though he were the victim of an angry assault—as though he were being driven out of a place where he had no business. It was impossible to get away from that feeling of something personal in storms and mountains.

When the rain finally stopped it was only an hour till daylight. He went out and grubbed in rotten logs for dry tinder and started a fire. The rising sun found him furiously rolling and packing. He was more than ready to go. . . .

Chapter Fifteen

HE was relieved to find that he had the ranger station to himself for a while. Lynch was still on leave and his simple duties were outlined to him in a letter from headquarters. He was supposed to spend eight hours a day in the saddle and to cover all the trails and roads in his district. Danger from fire now was over and the camping season was drawing to a close. In one place timber was being cut and it was his duty to appear there once in a while and see that top-brush was properly piled and burned. If sheep were caught trespassing on the cattle range he was to put them off. It looked to him like a simple and pleasant job —one long lazy ride on a good horse with a good log house to live in, a board bunk with a mattress to sleep in, a sheet iron stove for cooking. All this seemed luxury after the days on the mountain top. He felt positively pampered.

The first thing he did was to ride down to the town, get his mail and buy things. He drew only seventy-five dollars a month but it was clear profit and he felt rich. He bought cigars as well as pipe tobacco, sweet chocolate and a new shirt. There

was not much a fellow could buy in a place like that and not much he could use. He stood rattling money in his pocket and staring at the shelves, trying to see something he wanted. Afterwards he hung around a while talking to people in the combined store and post office. Jim Bullard came in, shook hands, introduced him to a few and went his way. He divided his time between the ranch and a camp on the other side of the mountains where most of his horses ranged.

The people he met in the store were not what he had expected, but he was beginning to see that people never were. The store-keeper, for instance, was some kind of an oriental and he seemed altogether too exotic for such a setting. He was a man compactly fat with a large black bush of a mustache, a skin like well-tanned oily leather and small eyes with a hard shrewd twinkle. He would have looked well with a turban and scimitar and one could imagine him beheading an enemy with a pleasant smile, a polite but deadly gesture. He told Alec to make himself at home, come in often, and if he wanted any credit, it would be all right.

Bullard also introduced him to a young man named Noles, who seemed a little hard to account for. Noles was tall, pink and blond, with an expression of happy, innocent surprise, as though he had just opened his wide blue eyes upon the world and found it amazing and interesting. He wore a

blue shirt, dirty khaki trousers and riding boots run over at the heel but he spoke with the correctness and the unmistakable inflection of the college-bred, upper middle class American. His speech was of the kind you hear in country clubs and the lobbies of good hotels. Alec was not surprised to hear Noles mention Princeton and to learn that he had spent two years there, but he could not understand what Noles was doing in the mountains.

"Have you got a ranch around here?" he ventured to ask.

"Yes, I've got a dog ranch," Noles confided with a happy laugh, as though he had started a dog ranch just to be droll. "I've got sixteen Airedales and another litter coming next week. Come and see me some day and I'll give you a pup."

They were joined by a little man with large nearsighted eyes behind thick spectacles. He was gray enough to be sixty but his face was smooth and ruddy and his expression was young, not to say infantile. He was Dr. Matsell, a veterinary surgeon, an Englishman and a botanist. All of these three titles to consideration he was eager to make known and also the fact that he had not been outside of the canyon in sixteen years and did not intend ever to go. He was emphatic and even a little heated about this last.

"Why should I leave here?" he demanded, al-

most glaring at Alec and Noles. "I have everything here that I want—haven't I?"

Nobody offered an argument on that point and he suddenly began telling about a patch of wild tiger lilies he had found. They were very rare, it seemed. He described them with intense delight, waving small eager hands in the air, his large blue eyes shining through thick lenses. Noles suddenly interrupted him to tell Alec about a wonderful pup he had raised who went hunting alone, caught horned toads and brought them home uninjured in his mouth. He always laid them on the floor and looked up to his master for further orders. He would then, at a signal, either put the toad to death or release it. Noles felt that this spontaneous subordination of brute instinct to human judgment was very remarkable. He had an idea all right, but he was much more excited than clear about it. And Dr. Matsell was not at all interested. He broke in again with his tiger lilies, evidently eager to convince Alec that they were much more interesting than pups. For ten minutes it was pups against tiger lilies, the two fighting for Alec's attention while he sat bewildered, nodding first one way and then the other, feeling as though he had a couple of bright excited children on his knees. A stranger evidently was a valued prize. The natives no doubt were fed up on pups and tiger lilies.

Their circle was presently enriched by the advent of a stout, bowlegged fellow with a sclerotic face, narrow blue eyes and hair like sun-bleached hay.

"A public benefactor of these parts," Noles introduced. "Mr. Alfred Carney, our leading bootlegger."

"That's no way to introduce a man," Dr. Matsell growled.

"It's all right, it's all right," said Carney heartily. "I'm out on bail and waiting to be indicted. When I've paid my fine, it'll be different."

He looked like a tramp but his manner was that of the eternal professional host. He reminded Alec of all the head waiters and barkeepers he had ever seen. Whatever anybody said was a good joke to Mr. Carney—a contribution to human joy. He was working up a dance, it appeared, for the following Saturday night.

"It's only two dollars a throw, boys, ladies and liquor free. Mr. McGarnigal, you be sure to come. You'll meet all the folks, and believe me, we've got some likely gals around here."

Alec felt warmed and pleased. He was being welcomed into the heart of a community. But he was also a little bored by so much talk and he had a couple of letters to read. He began to edge toward the door.

But when he reached the porch, Mr. Carney

was still with him. Mr. Carney was going his way and they rode off together.

Casual as their meeting seemed, Alec soon understood that it was full of purpose on the part of Mr. Carney. He wanted to know all about the stranger and he was exceedingly adroit about asking questions without ever being blunt or rude.

Alec had taken a certain pride in passing for a native. He had imagined his drawl and his sunburn constituted a disguise none could penetrate. But in just a little while Mr. Carney knew that he was from New York. Alec felt that it was difficult to explain why he had come West and what he intended to do there, the fact being that he did not know himself, but when he said he was just bumming around and his plans were uncertain, Mr. Carney was full of understanding and sympathy.

"Fine idea. . . . Just the thing for a young feller. I done a lot of knocking about myself when I was your age and I ain't never regretted it. . . . Go it while you're young, boy!"

Mr. Carney also adroitly learned that Alec had bought his horse from Bullard, that he had been cruising timber all summer, that he had been to Taos and Santa Fe. Alec felt uncomfortably that he was being examined, classified and filed for future reference. He began to see—what became clearer in time—that Mr. Carney was unofficially

a public functionary, performing the work of a newspaper, a social register and even, in a measure, that of an artist. For he was a gifted gossip and he made his stories good. Having gotten all he wanted out of Alec, he proceeded to give generously in return. He knew all about everybody and he was more than willing to tell.

Alec had resented Carney's curiosity but he now found himself shamelessly indulging his own. He learned that Noles was the son of a wealthy Chicago family who had come to the canyon two years before, ostensibly for his health, and had been there ever since, drawing a generous remittance from home. Just why he stayed, nobody knew, but Mr. Carney hinted at dramatic reasons—a love affair, perhaps a scandal. He had a favorite phrase that ran through his discourse like a refrain. "It ain't none of my business, but. . . ."

It wasn't any of his business but he didn't mind telling that David, the storekeeper, was a Syrian, whose real name no one could pronounce, that he had everybody in the township in his debt, that he had raised a family of four beautiful daughters, each of whom was kept strictly secluded until she reached a certain age and then was sent East to be married. Two of them had already gone and a third was about to leave. They were allowed to go to the local dances but none of them ever saw a man alone. One young fellow a few years back

had fallen in love with one of the David girls and had made a heroic effort to elope with her. Mr. Carney didn't know exactly what had happened—it was none of his business—but the local doctor had picked a load of bird shot out of somebody's hide and a certain young man had taken his meals standing for several weeks. Alec would meet the oriental beauties next Saturday night but he would be well advised not to let himself become enamored. It was none of Mr. Carney's business but he didn't like to see a promising young fellow get in wrong at the start. . . .

Old Doc Matsell was a nut. He was a good horse doctor but no matter how urgent his professional duties he was always likely to stop by the roadside to pull some weed to pieces and forget all about everything else. Young Jim Bullard was the best horseman in seven counties but he had a terrible temper. He had knocked a man through one of the windows in the store only a few months before—a stranger who had said something Jim didn't like to that Bullard girl.

Mr. Carney's breath betrayed drinks. One word led to another. The longer he talked the more indiscreet he became. He knew all about the intricate bi-racial composition of the Bullard family. Jim was the old man's son by a former marriage and the present Mrs. Bullard, a Mexican, was his stepmother. The girl was a second cousin and she

was half Mexican. She had been married and divorced—at least she claimed a divorce. Mr. Carney let it be known that in his opinion she had simply been deserted and had taken refuge with her relatives in the mountains. It was none of his business and he didn't know the details but he thought if the girl was really free Jim Bullard would marry her. At least if he was crazy enough about her to wallop anybody that looked at her twice he ought to marry her.

With growing zest Mr. Carney ran through the population of the village. It was amazing how many stories he knew that were no credit to anyone. . . . Alec was appalled to discover what dark currents of hate and intrigue ran below the placid-looking surface of this Arcadian place. Not only had they scandals here but these seemed immortal. What had happened eleven years ago was still a good story to Mr. Carney and he remembered every detail and perhaps, Alec thought, added a few. Listening to Mr. Carney was just like peeping through a keyhole or a bedroom window. It gave the same shamed furtive kind of interest. It made Alec feel a little as though he had put his own foot in a mudhole too—especially in flirting with the Bullard girl. That, he resolved, should go no further. He could see this was an excellent place to leave women alone—a place where they still were guarded with fists and shotguns like valuable property. Not that he was scared, but he

valued his peace and dignity. He planned just how he would live here—friendly but aloof and unattached.

Not until Mr. Carney left him at his own door did he have a chance to tear open his letters—the first he had seen in weeks. One of them was from Amaryllis and it contained the surprising news that she was back in New York and also that she was thinking of him. He ran through it rapidly catching phrases but losing sequence because her writing, though large and bold was very hard to read.

". . . practically starved to death in Santa Fe . . . thought I could get commissions and make money . . . staying with kind but tiresome friends only way I could have made a living there . . . already have a flat and a part-time job but no idea what next. . . . Be sure and look me up when and if you ever come back here."

When she got to the subject of himself he puzzled out her words with the utmost care.

"I have thought of you often and remember with great pleasure our little dance together, etc. etc. I don't know why but it sticks in the mind and not because men are scarce either. I have refused one offer of marriage and two indecent proposals since we met. You are not the kind of man I ever thought I could fall for and I don't mean that I have but anyway I would like to see you again and as I said I have a flat of my own and . . ."

At this point the letter became most annoyingly obscure, both in its phrasing and in its chirography. He spent ten minutes trying with intense concentration to puzzle out that next sentence as though it had contained the key to his destiny, but it eluded him still.

For a longer while he sat holding the letter in his hand thinking uncomfortably. Her phrases brought the girl back to his mind with a startling vividness. He could imagine the very gestures she would have made as she uttered them. He had not thought of her for weeks, and yet now he felt sure she had made a deeper impression than any other ever. . . .

But it was not the girl that disturbed him most. It was that her letter seemed to bring the whole outside world with it. For weeks the mountains had bounded his universe. He had lived in them as completely as a bird or a squirrel. Now he was suddenly aware of everything outside them. New York roared in his ears. His universe of trees and mountains shrank to a far-away hiding place, with the world going by all around. He wondered uneasily what he was doing here, where he was going next. An inexplicable guilt beset him, as though he had evaded an issue, run from a struggle. . . . Why? He didn't know. He only knew the letter had invaded his refuge, poisoned his peace. He tore it up angrily and scattered the bits.

Eager for something to take his mind off a problem it couldn't solve, he took a fly rod off its pegs on the porch of the cabin and began casting for trout. He fished at first with little interest and no success, but presently a trout over a foot long rose from under a sunken log and lifted its pink belly and spotted side clear of the water as it struck at his lure. Immediately he was absorbed. He had never caught a fish so large. He crouched low and cast with all his art, easing the fly down over the spot where he knew the trout was hidden. It rose again and struck and with profound satisfaction he felt the vibrant living shock of contact as he sunk the hook in its jaw and jerked. It flew high in the air, left the hook and came down flopping on the gravel beside the creek. He dropped the rod and pounced on it like a wild animal. Nothing on earth seemed more important than to hold that fish. Twice it slipped through his fingers but he finally got a grip in its gills and broke its neck.

He was breathing hard with excitement and effort. Lighting a pipe to quiet his nerves he cut a willow twig, strung his catch and started back toward his house, planning dinner, ravenously hungry.

In the dusk the mountains were solid purple walls, unpassable and complete, like the boundaries of some ancient imaginary world.

Chapter Sixteen

PEOPLE came to Carney's dance from all over the mountains. Some came in cars but cowponies stood at the hitchrack and men took off their spurs to dance. A Mexican made gifted music on an accordion and he was relayed by a squawky phonograph. The girls sat all around the room on benches and the men for the most part hung about the door, cracked jokes and sidled unobtrusively into a back room to sample Carney's forty-rod. It was nearly white, had a strong corn flavor and a surprising potency. Carney, lifting a full tumbler to the light, told them his father had made it before him in Western Virginia.

"It runs in our family to make licker, boys. We know how to make it and no government or nothing else can't stop us." He downed his tumbler in two gulps as if it had been water. "I've drunk it sence I was ten years old," he told them, "and I never had a sick day in my life."

Warmed by two drinks of Carney's historic elixir, Alec surveyed the dance with hope and interest. He liked it, for one thing, because it looked so much like all those dances his uncle had told

him about, in the track-end cowtowns of the seventies and the mining towns of the eighties, where bad men swung dangerous women and guns cracked when rivals met. The low-ceiled smoky room, the booted men, the wailing music of the lone accordion were all the properties of legendary western drama. He was sorry there were no guns in sight and the company seemed so tame and well-behaved.

Jim Bullard looked more like the fitting hero for a good old-fashioned ruction than any of the others. He wore a new pair of tan riding boots outside his pants and a bright blue shirt open at the neck, and he was heavily flushed with liquor and still drinking. His blue eyes had a wild look and his bulk was calculated to make any man stand aside.

Most of the women were of the lean blond Texan type, with light wispy hair and high drawling voices, but the two daughters of David, the Syrian, were in striking contrast, with their heavy black eyebrows, their perfect dusky skins and deep bosoms. Alec could well understand that David needed a shot-gun to keep them from the hands of men.

Lucretia Bullard was there and looking better, he thought, than either of the other times he had seen her. She had on silk stockings this time and her slim legs were undeniably pretty. She was

popular, too, for she was easily the best dancer on the floor. Alec had to watch his chance to dance with her at all.

They had no conversation. She buried her face against his shoulder, hooked her left arm around him and gave herself up wholly to the music. She danced as she rode, with a furious abandon. Her only communication was a squeeze of the hand when he let her go.

He had made up his mind not to take more than three drinks of Carney's liquor, but he soon passed that limit and then lost count. He perspired like a man in a turkish bath and shed his coat and necktie as did the few others who had worn such gauds. He felt as though he could go on dancing indefinitely and he took the girls as they came, hardly knowing one from the other, except that the Syrians were always distinguishable from the others by their pneumatic amplitude of bust. They were passive and silent while some of the other women gave him a steady stream of chatter to which he paid no heed. For the time being he was nothing but a dancing automaton.

About midnight Jim Bullard got into a quarrel with a tall rawboned boy and Carney, as master of the floor, felt called upon to act as peacemaker. Alec couldn't understand just what had started the trouble, but he knew the boy had been dancing with Lucretia Bullard a great deal. Bullard pushed

Carney roughly aside and made a mighty swing at the other, missing him at least a foot. The tall boy, with an expression of drunken ferocity, returned the attack with a haymaker which went equally wide of its mark. Then they collapsed into a clinch which had every appearance of a warm and friendly embrace, while the crowd gathered about them and roared and tittered. They were too drunk to fight, that was plain. They looked for all the world like a slow movie of a terrific battle. Their blows were wide and savage but lacked both speed and direction. Carney finally got them separated and started them dancing again, but the next time they met they began the fight anew and with just as little success. Other men crowded round them and pushed them apart and one group fell in a heap on the floor. The dance had degenerated into a rough-and-tumble with everybody too drunk to do any real harm. Alec found it supremely funny and doubled up with laughter, at the same time vaguely realizing that if he had been sober he would have rated it a mess.

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning when the party fell to pieces in a rumble of engines, a chorus of shouted farewells and drunken curses. Alec found himself on his horse and riding up the road with Jim Bullard and three or four others. They rode at a jog for a little way, and then sud-

denly Bullard let out a yell that seemed to split the night wide open and went down the road in a dead run, rolling in his saddle so that his head moved in a circle a yard wide. All the others went after him, whooping like Indians, splattering through a ford in the creek, rumbling over rickety bridges, ducking low limbs of roadside trees. It seemed a miracle that when they pulled up everybody was still mounted. Again they jogged a little while, horses frisking, men laughing and then another mad race started and another after that.

Alec felt as though he flew. Danger was forgotten and his horse was a part of himself. When he got home and pulled the saddle off his mare he was a little ashamed for she was dripping and heaving, pop-eyed with fright and her nostrils all aflutter. He might have run her to death, he thought, if he had had farther to go.

When he went to bed his bunk seemed to roll and plunge like a ship on a stormy sea and his mind swarmed with a lewd confusion of erotic fantasy. Finally he gave up sleep, rose and dressed and went to bathe his head in the icy creek. Afterward he was hungry, fried eggs and bacon, made coffee and sliced a loaf. When he had eaten he felt fine again. He went out and walked the canyon road, looking up at the bright steady blaze of the great mountain stars. He saw the moon go down among the pines, looking like a great pallid face

behind prison bars. The eastern sky grew pale, bringing out the lines of tree and rock like a film in its bath. He felt the icy wind that blows before the dawn and heard the last deep hoot of a great horned owl.

He liked this still and chilly solitude. It had become a familiar thing and it was a grateful one after the hot insanity of the dance, the stir of liquor in the blood, the sting and tease of close-pressed bodies. People maddened a man and confused him. Mountains and solitude soothed. He went back to bed and heavily to sleep.

Chapter Seventeen

IN strong reaction against his night of spree he rode the trails long and conscientiously for several days, starting early and returning late. He discovered nothing that seemed to demand the attention of a government officer but it gave him a feeling of moral well-being to cover the ground.

Almost every day, going or coming, he passed the Bullard ranch. Sometimes this was necessary and sometimes it was not, but it always happened. He never quite admitted to himself that he was watching the house but he always approached it with a feeling of anticipation and he always looked back over his shoulder after he had passed.

On the third day, late in the afternoon, he saw the girl Lucretia sitting on the porch. She waved and he rode over to the house. After all, it would do no harm to pass the time of day.

"Rest your hat a while," she suggested.

"I don't care if I do," said Alec.

He took a chair and they conversed stiffly. The intimacy they had found in the mountains seemed not to exist here at all. When the weather had been considered and the dance remembered, Alec picked his hat up off the floor.

"I guess I better be going," he said.

"Why don't you stay for supper?" she invited. "Jim killed a yearling yesterday. He and Mr. Carney'll be here pretty soon."

"Well . . . thanks," Alec hesitated. "All right. . . . I will."

They sat silent a while.

"I thought maybe I'd see you out riding some day," Alec hazarded.

She laughed.

"Keep your eye peeled and maybe you will," she said. "There's a blue buckskin mare in the corral I'm just honing to ride the first chance I get."

"Maybe we can have another race," said Alec, growing bold.

"Maybe I can outrun you this time," she hoped.

"I'll bet you can't!" said Alec. They both flushed and laughed. Things were getting warm.

Lucretia rocked uneasily before she spoke again.

"Don't make out you like me when Jim's around," she said.

Alec glanced at her and looked away again.

"Why not?" he asked.

"It might make trouble," she said.

"Are you engaged to him . . . or anything?" Alec pursued his inquiry bluntly, feeling he needed to know his status.

"O no . . . nothing like that," she said, looking at her feet.

Alec sat puzzled. He could not understand these people. Bullard was not her lover. . . . No. . . . If he had been she wouldn't have started this kind of a flirtation with a stranger. Maybe, though, Bullard planned to marry her when he got around to it. Or maybe it was just his old-fashioned Texas attitude to protect any woman in his house from any man with unannounced intentions. Maybe—in fact probably—he was a bit of a tyrant and a bully anyhow.

Bullard was not so hard to understand, but what was her game? Maybe—the thought startled him—she was planning to marry him! But no. Without knowing exactly why, he felt sure she wasn't. She wouldn't have gone at it that way. Maybe. . . . Well, anyway, it was clear that making love to her was making love to trouble. In this neck of the woods women still were property and guarded with guns. It was a good place to leave them alone. . . . He thought of Bullard swinging fists like cobblestones, of his sudden ugly temper, and he thought No. He looked sideways at Lucretia's trim legs and he wasn't sure. He felt again the tremendous power her isolation gave her. There and then she was the whole of womanhood to him. She was the only bit of charm and passion, of warm and willing flesh, in a great empty world of rock and timber. . . . His eyes climbed the line of her body and met her look.

She gave him a slow smile with lowered lids, a very wise-looking smile, as if she had read his thoughts. It was a smile he had seen before—that woman-smile of challenge which says here I am and if you turn away you'll be sorry. Now is our time, said her smile. It seemed to make prudence ridiculous and to rob his doubts of all their dignity. There was so little difference between being careful and being scared.

He grinned back at her, a little sheepishly, and they said nothing more that meant anything, but now they had an intrigue and both of them knew it. From now on they were fellow conspirators against a hostile world.

Jim Bullard and Carney rode up together a little later and Jim gave him a hearty greeting.

"Put your horse in the corral and eat with us," he invited. "Me and Carney are going to cut a watermelon after supper."

"I already asked him," Lucretia put in. She disappeared into the kitchen and presently the three on the porch heard through an open window the spat and hiss of meat hitting a hot pan and smelt the breath of boiling coffee.

The old woman was not there and after supper the three men sat and talked while Lucretia cleared the table and washed dishes.

Throughout the meal she had been sullen and silent, just as she was the first time he saw her,

and afterward she whisked in and out of the room and handled dishes with a ruthless energy that promised a smash any minute. She seemed to carry an atmosphere of suspense with her wherever she went and whatever she did.

When she had retired to the kitchen, Carney produced a large flat flask of his white liquor and passed it around for drinks out of the bottle, after which it went back into the inside pocket of his coat. This treat was repeated at intervals of about ten minutes and the conversation grew more intimate and more boisterous with each drink.

Alec drank when the others did but not very much. Bullard took long gurgling swigs and began rapidly turning red and perspiring, so that he had to unbutton the front of his shirt.

Carney told stories. He began with reminiscences of his part in the world war. It had been a safe one, as a sergeant attached to a remount station and a hospital for wounded horses. Carney had no tales of battle to tell, but he had observed the ways of the French with a sharp and intolerant eye. His contact with French civilization had given him just one thing—a powerful conviction of moral superiority. "It ain't so much what them frogs do as it's the way they do it," he propounded. "Them women over there just fairly throw it in your face. And the men stand for it!"

Bullard nodded profoundly. He too had gone

toward the war and gotten as far as a training camp on the other side.

"The French don't know what morality is," he agreed. "They jest leave it to the women."

Carney laughed and told a story which illustrated, not too aptly, the results of leaving morality to the women. Then he told another story and another. He had a regular repertoire, like an old-fashioned traveling salesman. Each story was a little smuttier than the last. He leaned forward in his chair and told them in a low drawling voice and the others leaned forward to hear. Time after time their heads drew together in a closening knot of interest and then flew back and apart as they exploded into the sudden violent laughter of concupiscent delight. The performance had almost the character of a ritual or a dance, like some primitive ceremony of males chanting their victory over women. . . . After each story they all had a drink.

Several times, when Carney's voice rose a little, Bullard uttered a precautionary hush, jerking his head in the direction of the kitchen door. He heard the stories himself with a stupid eagerness, seldom getting the point at first unless it was very obvious. But once he had it, his laugh provided a magnificent roaring climax.

This Bullard gaping at smut seemed to Alec not the same man as the Bullard who had such a

sure and gentle hand with horses. In fact, although he duly leaned forward with the others and laughed with them as best he could, he felt a little out of the party. Carney's stories were dirty enough but it seemed to him they were not funny enough. Besides, it was getting hot in the room and the liquor was making his head swim. He presently told them he had to saddle and ride early, spoke his good-nights and went.

Outside the house he stopped a minute to breathe and look at the sky. He could hear Lucretia in the kitchen rattling dishes and humming a tune. It was the first time he had heard her make any kind of sound that could be taken as expressing contentment.

Standing near the kitchen window he began softly whistling the tune she sang. After a while her singing and also the noise of her work stopped for a minute and he thought she must have heard. Then the screen door at the back of the kitchen creaked gently on its hinges. He knew that she must have come out very quietly but when he went around to the door he could not see her at first.

His hands discovered her as soon as his eyes. She stood flattened against the wall just outside the door, silent and rigid. When he took hold of her he could feel the flutter of blood in her throat and heart and it made him realize what an act of daring this was to her—what a sweet thrill of

crime and danger she must be getting. He shared it, too. Undeniably danger and secrecy made kisses sweeter. But hers were sweet anyway.

Riding homeward he felt as though she had put a hot mark on his mouth that branded him hers and would bring him back. He also knew this was foolishness but still he was happy. A little expansion of his flesh begot a vast expansion of his spirit so that it seemed to fill and possess the night. The mountains were a setting for his dream of conquest and the creek sang in tune with him as he rode whistling—"Love me and the world is mine."

Chapter Eighteen

HE now rode past the Bullard ranch on purpose every day and watched it shamelessly for the flutter of a skirt.

Three days he watched in vain and he was irritated and restless. He was tasting the obsessive emotion that grows in lonely places. Partly because there was so little else to think about he thought about Lucretia all the time. To him she was a mystery—the profound mystery of a simple but unrevealing soul. What did she want of him? Was she only playing with him? Had she lost her nerve? In long riding hours he asked himself these questions, and they seemed the most important in his life.

He might have called on her again but that was not what he wanted, and he was sure it was not what she wanted either. They had a tacit appointment to meet secretly somewhere on horseback—at least he thought they had—and the longer that meeting was delayed the more it filled his imagination.

When he saw her on the fourth day riding down the road towards him his heart began to hammer

and he felt the tension of a great suspense. She was on her way home he knew. Maybe she had been looking for him. Would she go on up the road and let him follow? Would anybody see them? He peered around guiltily, like a man about to perpetrate a crime. . . . What in hell was he afraid of? Bullard? No. For one thing he knew Bullard was on the other side of the mountains. Weren't they both free white and twenty-one? They were. By rights, it was nobody's business what they did.

But here it was everybody's business. He could no more escape a furtive feeling here than he could walk out from under his hair. In this place their philandering was scandal, they knew it, and it made them self-conscious conspirators.

She met him with a smile and they both stopped. His look was a question and she answered it with a shake of her head. She glanced around.

"Not today," she said. "Tomorrow afternoon on the round mountain trail."

Then she left him quickly, glancing back once, and he jogged on in the opposite direction, pleased but also a little puzzled.

In a few minutes he understood. Rounding the next turn in the road he met Carney. She had known Carney was behind her and doubtless she knew Carney for the omniscient and communicative soul that he was. Everybody, he had noticed,

treated Carney with respect, although he deserved little. Doubtless they were all afraid of him.

Carney stopped him. Carney was cordial, expansive, wanted to talk. Did the man have a twinkle in his eye or did Alec imagine it? Was he afraid of Carney too?

Anyway he was polite to Carney, although just then he would have taken pleasure in punching Carney's nose. As he sat listening to Carney's chatter, he was uncomfortably conscious of the man's malign power. . . . Carney had somehow made himself the messenger and poet of the obscene, malignant, hidden part of the village life. He carried its word, he cherished its legend, he brewed the drink that released it now and then to the light. He knew so much about it that he gave the impression of knowing everything. . . . Alec could not comprehend the man but he knew that Carney was the enemy, the one who would watch and pry, perhaps would tell. Disgusted he edged away from Carney with polite good-byes, hating Carney, hating himself for a hypocrite. . . . But not for long. . . . He was thinking about tomorrow.

Next day he rode the Round Mountain trail. He rode it up and he rode it down, very slowly, but he met no one. Then he tied his horse in a clump of trees and sat down in a carefully chosen

place where he could watch the trail without being seen. All of his maneuvers were full of an unusual cunning. He was alert and watchful.

Sitting still was harder than riding. He smoked an incessant pipe, and cursed Lucretia for not coming. He kept telling himself she probably wouldn't come and he knew that if she didn't he would still be sitting there when the sun went down.

When she appeared at last he let her ride by, then mounted and followed. She heard the pounding of hooves, looked back, laughed and quirted her pony into a run. The blue buckskin was a little horse, all mustang, but fast, and Lucretia raced in earnest to the tune of a high shrill laugh, like that of a child in the passion and ecstasy of play.

There was no mercy for horse flesh now. Something long suppressed broke loose in this hard riding and they lashed and spurred as though they had been running for their lives. Alec caught her and kissed her and she fought him off and ran again. That game of tag they played over and over with a delight at once fierce and childish, and always they were going higher, up among the spruce where no one rode.

Alec didn't know where they were bound for but she apparently did. At a certain point she dodged him and left the trail, threading a way

through timber so thick that he could only follow. . . .

In the mountains everything frightened, everything that seeks escape and seclusion, goes instinctively up. All hunted animals climb, for safety is on the summit where all approaches are seen.

They emerged at last on a little knoll which tipped a spur of the main ridge. It was bare of trees, covered with thick short grass and ringed with thick timber.

Here he persuaded her off her horse and she was docile in his hands now. She had fought and ridden all the resistances out of her body. She had conquered herself. She pretended to be afraid but she was easily reassured. She pretended to be reluctant but she was trembling with eagerness.

When the short fever of their desire was over, they lay on the ground in the sun side by side. It seemed to Alec that he had never known a moment of such complete rest, such absolute pause and hush. His troubled blood was quiet now and every straining nerve and muscle was relaxed. Fear and guilt were forgotten. He felt innocent and free.

He became aware of the solid peace of mountains and trees all at once, as though it had been the creation of his mood. It seemed to him that the wind had dropped just then, that everything

had gone suddenly quiet. He could almost have believed that the earth had stopped turning.

Lost in the miracle of his own precious feelings, he had almost forgotten the girl for a moment. Slightly embarrassed he turned to touch her, to kiss her. . . . She was sound asleep.

Chapter Nineteen

FOR a while now his days were surprisingly peaceful.

Lucretia rode with him when she could and when she couldn't they found other ways of meeting. In their precarious relation they came to feel a sense of security and it made them bold. He whistled again beside the kitchen window and she came out to meet him. Then she visited him one evening at his cabin and it seemed easy and safe. They were absurdly sure that no one knew.

He went about his work regularly but he led a lazy life. He hated to mount and ride in the morning and he used to postpone his departure by sitting on his doorstep and feeding crumbs and grains of corn to the chipmunks who lived in the eaves of his house. They were a pest to him, gnawing every bit of food or leather that he left uncovered. Once he had intended making war on them with a small-caliber rifle, but this course was too violent and strenuous for his mood, so he began feeding them instead. His colony of pets steadily grew. It included three different kinds of

chipmunks and in course of time a few blue jays and a small red squirrel began to show up at feeding time and became daily tamer.

In the evenings, if he couldn't get to his girl he often dropped into the store and joined the group of loafers who always gathered there. They bored him for the most part and yet he had a pleasant sense of solidarity with them and he developed a growing interest in the neighborhood gossip. Often this committee on the state of the community would adjourn to Carney's place and drink highballs of white liquor mixed with ginger ale. Alec once carried home a bottle, and found that it added greatly to the comfort of his life. If he felt blue a drink invariably picked him up and if he felt fine a drink seemed to cap and complete his felicity. Once he and Lucretia achieved a gaudy night when she visited him a second time and they celebrated the event with several drinks. She contracted a bad case of giggles and when he took her back to the sleeping ranch he had to gag her with a hand over her mouth to keep her from waking the family. The fact that they had probably sailed within an inch of catastrophe did not bother him at all. He rode home singing "Love me and the world is mine," feeling happy and peaceful. Whatever kinks of restlessness and discontent accumulated in his nerves, Lucretia seemed invari-

ably to take out of them. Without her he would probably have been planning some new move, but with her he seemed to be anchored.

Sitting one night with his boots off and his feet on the table, reading a New York newspaper several days old, with a Carney highball at his elbow and his pipe going well, he saw himself with a certain unexpected detachment. He laid down his paper and looked himself over critically. His shirt was ragged and his khaki pants were soiled. He felt the two-day stubble on his chin. He paid no attention to his appearance here because no one else cared how he dressed. . . . It occurred to him, as a sudden surprising idea, that perhaps he was going to pot. He refilled and relit his pipe and considered this question gravely for some time. He finally reached two conclusions—first, that he didn't know and second, that he didn't care—at least, he cared very little. He took another drink and then he did not care at all. He resumed his reading of the stock market report, wondering vaguely how people made money out of stocks and whether he could make any if he tried. The question had only a faint interest for him because he didn't just then feel any need of money. He passed on to the advertisements of flats for rent and considered all the places he might live if he were in New York, but this too was only a game for he felt no impulse to go to New York. Such aimless

ruminations filled much of his time when he was alone at night.

His days were especially pleasant now because the rains were over. The earth was ripe, the summer growth was full and heavy, still untouched by decay. On the mesas he saw broods of grouse and wild turkey almost full grown, fat and tame.

He felt as never before the charm of this country with its wide canyons where the sun fell on rippling water and open glades, and its high flat mesas timbered with wide-planted pine, where a man could ride for hours without a trail. Berries were ripe along the creek and wild cosmos pinked the opens. The streams ran clear and full and the trout rose easily to his fly.

It was a country rich and ready-made for the uses of man. It seemed a natural home for free beings who wanted room and beauty. As he rode through its still sunlit emptiness it struck him as strange that men were piled in great heaps here and there while so much of the earth was left to birds and squirrels.

The mellow stability of the weather and the peaceful monotony of his days combined to create an illusion of permanence and security. It was hard to believe that anything was ever going to change. Yet already a few yellow leaves were showing on the aspen and a few red ones on the scrub oak. The early mountain winter was on its

way. When he and Lucretia rode together late in the afternoon the cold dusk often drove them home.

They ran no more races now but jogged placidly side by side, most of the time in silence. Their understanding was tacit but complete. Some strong bond had grown up between them but it did not live in the conscious parts of their minds. When they did talk it was generally about horses and weather or else about the exigencies and hazards of their affair. He was cautious and inclined to plan and consider but she was an opportunist and a fatalist. She clung stoutly to the notion that she had never intended to do anything so rash and wrong and that she could not understand how it had come about. She deplored the whole business and often referred to it as "this foòlishness," but it was quite evident that she felt no real remorse.

In every way she was beyond his comprehension. He had never been so intimate with anyone he understood so little.

Her simple history he gathered in disconnected scraps. About her career as a country schoolteacher he could learn nothing except that she had hated it, and about her marriage she was still more reticent and also more bitter. She was full of a sharp aching resentment but none of it went toward him. He was no part of the world that had thwarted and deceived her. For him she had a

sort of timid tenderness, a scant tart sweetness like a crab apple. She gave herself to him silent and eager and seemed to ask nothing in return. He knew her body but that was all. Sometimes he had a baffled feeling when they tried to talk but it always ended in their embraces. Going toward her he often puzzled over her, sometimes with a bad conscience, but coming away from her he felt released and relieved. He whistled and sang riding home from their trysts.

His most revealing glimpse of her inner self he achieved one day when she began talking with indignant heat about her life at the ranch. They had taken her in when she was broke and deserted. They had been, O so kind. And now they had made a drudge of her and almost a prisoner. The old woman was lazy as sin, made her do all the work and watched her day and night. Jim Bullard was under his stepmother's thumb. He backed her up in everything she said.

Alec was moved to ask why she didn't leave the place if she didn't like it. Immediately she became silent again. He felt a ruthless will to break her silence for once, even if he made her angry.

"Around the store," he remarked, "they all say you plan to marry Jim."

"Do they?" she was sullen and little interested. "Well. . . . I could if I wanted to. . . . Just

like that!" She snapped her fingers. Tone and gesture expressed an immense contempt.

Alec felt uncomfortable.

"He's asked you then?"

"No . . . but he would if I wanted him to. I can keep him right where I want him any time. It's the old woman that bothers me."

She was silent a while and then burst out suddenly, with a surprising bitterness.

"You talk about going!" she said. "It's easy for you. You can go . . . anywhere you want. You're smart and a man. I could go to town, yes, with about four dollars. I'm done with school-teaching and I can't hold anything but a country job on starvation wages anyway. I don't know office work or anything like that. There's just one job I could get and that's waiting on table. I know that game. I knew a girl that was in it. Men will take you out . . . for a while. . . . But they won't marry you. . . . O Hell. . . . Le's ride!"

She quirted her pony and rode away, leaving her problems behind.

Alec jogged slowly after, depressed and disillusioned, weakened by a sudden pang of pity. He had never pitied her before, but never before had he seen her as she was. She had been at first a mystery to him and then a romantic challenge—a nymph on horseback, a vision of desire found in a forest. Her silence had nursed his illusions.

Whether by intention or by chance she had kept her essential self hidden. Now for the first time he saw her as a real person in a real world. Her life was painfully clear to him—its meagerness, its pathetic alternatives. There was nothing in it she wanted either way. He could see now that her affair with him was a desperate snatch at happiness, risking everything for a few good hours. He wished ardently he could do something for her—something to make her life look more hopeful, something to relieve the painful feeling of guilt and pity it gave him to think about her now.

During the next few days this wish begot an idea—one that he knew for folly as soon as it entered his head. It occurred to him that he could marry Lucretia.

He knew that she didn't expect it of him. He knew enough about the ways of women to be sure that if she had thought of him as a possible husband there would have been no wild rides in the woods, no love making on the hilltops. But more than that, her whole unspoken attitude had showed him she expected nothing more than what she had. She knew well enough they didn't belong to the same world, had only a passing and accidental meaning for each other. He knew it too. And yet this idiotic dream of marriage persisted, fattening itself on many things besides desire.

When he thought of it he always pictured him-

self riding home at night—generally it was a cold night—to a neat little stone house standing under tall pines beside a good clear stream. From far away he would see the light shining through the window and when he got there a fire of pine knots would be sputtering on the hearth and a good hot supper would be ready. Lucretia figured in the dream only as a slim brown silent presence ministering to his need. When he had eaten his fill and smoked his pipe, she would be there, waiting, willing, silent and eager and there would be no dangers or difficulties. She would be his.

From the woman his mind wandered in facile imaginings all over and around this establishment of which she was the vital core. He planned in some detail a dam he would build across the creek, providing himself with a swimming pool, a private fish pond and a supply of ice. He decided also on something in the nature of a summer house or retreat, well back in the woods, where he could retire to read, think and cultivate the acquaintance of chipmunks, squirrels and birds. He would need, he decided, at least one more good horse and three dogs, airedales or bloodhounds, trained to hunt bobcats, mountain lions and bears. A good radio would be a great help when the snows were deep and he would buy a lot of books and do all the reading he had ever intended to do.

This dream was a singularly entertaining thing

and it had a capacity for almost unlimited expansion. The only part of it that remained vague was the practical detail of how this idyllic home was to be maintained. He could stay in the Forest Service, unless they fired him, but the pay was small and the prospects poor, especially for a man with no technical training in forestry. Besides, he had reason to suspect that as a forester he was something less than a complete success. He had too much difficulty in keeping his mind on the work. Of course his establishment might be a ranch but ranching didn't pay either and besides he had no money with which to buy one. If Uncle Alec had left him that ten thousand now. . . . Every time he got as far as the ways and means his dream petered out and died, but he could always think of something that started it up again.

The next time he saw Lucretia he looked upon her with a new feeling, half possessive and half frightened. Suddenly she had become a peril and a problem, through no will of her own, but simply because his imagination had begun to use her as keystone for all its structures.

They rode in silence for a long time, both of them lost in thoughts they wouldn't speak. Now and then he took a puzzled sidelong look at her. How had she gotten this strong and troubling hold upon him? More conscious of her than ever before, he tried to size her up. She was not at all

striking to the eye. Her features were handsome, in a way, but her small dark face was certainly not beautiful. It was too sullen, it lacked all radiance. . . . But he had seen it radiant, he had made it so. She was in part now his creation. And her figure wasn't striking either. It was almost boyishly flat, but he had known her naked and her long legs and small firm breasts then lent her an unexpected grace. She was no longer just what he saw but also all he remembered about her, all she had made him feel. And even more she was a focus for deep desires that life seemed bound to deny. She was not one single thing of flesh and blood, but a bewildering crowd of dreams and wishes, of memory and desire.

"What are you thinking about?" she demanded. "I never seen you set and study so long without saying a word."

"How about yourself," he defended uneasily. "You're pretty quiet too."

"I'm wondering what we'll do when snow flies," she said. "If you haven't gone off and left me by then."

Chapter Twenty

WHEN he failed to see her for three days he was not surprised. She was often unable to escape her family for that long. But when five days had gone by, he began to wonder. He stopped once at the Bullard ranch but found no one there except the old woman and she was uncommunicative. She told him only that neither Jim nor Lucretia was home.

Something in her manner faintly alarmed him, but he didn't think much about it. She always gave him a guilty feeling. He seldom went to the ranch for that reason. Alone with Lucretia in the mountains or at his own place he always felt he had a right to her, but as surely as he went to the ranch and encountered the family he lost all self-assurance. He felt as though he had come to rob a roost.

This same uneasy feeling assailed him when he saw Jim Bullard riding up the road toward his cabin the next day. He had a flash of guilty premonition. Jim was coming to see him and the visit had something to do with Lucretia.

He argued with himself against this assump-

tion. Jim always followed this road on the way to his camp across the mountain.

But this time Jim turned up the side road that led to the ranger station. He got off his horse stiffly and grunted a reply to Alec's greeting. He squatted on his heels and made marks on the ground with a little stick for about a minute before he began. He spoke without looking up.

"I reckon you can keep away from the ranch from now on," he drawled. "And from Lucretia too."

Alec felt the blood burning in his face and ears. His hands clenched for battle and his breath came hard. He did not trust himself to speak. And yet in some curious way he sat apart from his own rage. It seemed a purely physical thing. Even while he felt like smashing Bullard's face he knew there was nothing in this whole business that concerned him deeply.

"You heard me," Bullard said. "You understand. . . . That's about all then I reckon." He moved slowly toward his horse. Alec stood up.

"What's the trouble?" he demanded. He knew well enough but he felt bound to demand an explanation.

Bullard stopped and turned.

"Listen! . . . We don't need to have no argument about this . . . do we? You heard what I said, didn't you?" His voice rose as he talked.

"You know damned well what's the trouble. You've been sneaking around there, seeing that girl when I wasn't home, whistling outside the window and I don't know what all. . . ."

"Hasn't she got a right to see anybody she pleases?" Alec demanded.

Bullard began to turn a deep red.

"Listen! Don't give me no back talk!" he said. "If you'd have wanted to see that girl decent, you could have come and told me, couldn't you? You could have come and set on the porch with her, couldn't you? What call did you have to go sneaking around after dark, whistling outside of windows and meeting her way up among the tops? How come you done all your courting when I was over across the mountain there? But for a few good friends I've got I wouldn't have never knowed nothing about it. That there is my ranch, I want you to understand, and I'm boss of everything on it. You ain't got no more right to come up there and sneak a woman out the back door than you have to sneak a horse out of my corral. I got a gun handy for anybody that comes monkeying around there without so much as by your leave and you better remember it. No man's gonna git away with nothing on my ranch, I don't care who he is. . . . And who the hell are you anyway? I'll admit you looked like the real stuff to me when I first seen you. You talked like you

knowed something. But now I'm onto you I can see you're nothing but a goddam greenie out to have a little fun. You ain't got no real business being here at all. I don't know where you belong, but take it from me, it's somewheres else!"

He stood silent a moment, staring at Alec, red and belligerent, supremely self-assured, as perfect an image of militant righteousness as an angel of God with a flaming sword.

Alec was silent too. He was painfully aware that the situation called for some kind of heroic gesture, even a violent one, but somehow he couldn't make it. Not that he was frightened—not in the least. But he couldn't think of a thing to say that would make the slightest impression on Bullard, nor of a thing to do that wouldn't be wholly foolish.

Meantime Bullard had swung into his saddle. He spurred away with a haste which suggested that he was glad to have done with a difficult duty.

"You heard me!" he threw back over his shoulder. "Keep away from my diggings—that's all!"

Before Bullard had been gone five minutes, Alec, in his imagination, had done a number of things. . . . Leaping forward in a burst of rage he seized a piece of stove wood off the ground, and smashed the man over the head, knocking him cold. He then brought him to his senses by pouring a bucket of water over his head and sent him

home chastened and apologetic. . . . Reaching inside the door he seized his rifle and jabbed a threatening muzzle into the region of Bullard's solar plexus. The big boob stood with his hands in the air and his mouth wide open. "Now, goddam you, if you're done talking, I've got a few words to say myself. . . ." The girl was a free citizen, wasn't she? She was neither a slave nor a minor, was she? She had a right to see whom she pleased, then, didn't she, and when she pleased? As to what his relations with the lady were, that was nobody else's business. Merely to enquire was an impertinence. . . . Throwing the saddle on his horse, he mounted and rode at a gallop to the Bullard ranch. Lucretia came smiling to the door to meet him. "Come, my girl! Come with me." He gave her a stirrup and lifted her onto the saddle before him. . . .

As the blood ebbed from his ears, this flow of dramatic invention came to an end. He still felt profoundly that he should have done or said something adequate and decisive, but with a cooling head it was hard to imagine what that something could have been. If Bullard had stayed a little longer Alec might have started a fight. His mood for a few minutes had certainly been murderous. And he was undeniably glad now that Bullard had gone before anything happened. He might have killed Bullard. And then again, Bullard might

have killed him. Or pitched him into the creek or something like that. A hero was at an undeniable disadvantage when the villain outweighed him fifty pounds or more.

As for the things he might have said, the trouble was that none of them would have made the slightest impression on Bullard. In his own opinion Bullard was supremely and completely right. He was the guardian of morality and womanhood. And there was the unfortunate fact that Alec's affair with Lucretia had been, to say the least of it, surreptitious. And why? Because he was ashamed of it? Not in the least! Simply because she had wanted it that way. And . . . well . . . when you came right down to it, it couldn't have been any other way in such a place as this.

As for riding to the ranch and claiming her openly, that would be the greatest imbecility of all. Any wife would be a white elephant to him now. His dreams of marriage and a life of idyllic ease beside a singing stream now looked peculiarly ridiculous to him. He began to feel, in fact, that he had sat beside this particular stream about long enough. One of Bullard's sentences stuck in his mind. "I don't know where you belong, but take it from me, it's somewhere else!"

He rode morosely all that day and sat morosely beside his fire at night. He couldn't go away just then. He was in duty bound to wait until

Lynch came back. The ranger might be along any day now, and it might be a week or more. A week seemed a long time.

For the first time in many days he felt lonely. He had no desire to ride down to the store and join the group there. He felt sure all of them would know all about what had happened. Carney would have told them. Doubtless it was Carney who had told Bullard.

Sitting alone in his shack he felt like an outlaw camped on the edge of a settlement. He was no part of the place and he had no stake in it. Here he was only a marauder, a mysterious and dangerous stranger.

He wondered about Lucretia. What would become of her? Would they turn her away? He squirmed. He had gotten her into this fix. Or had she gotten him into it? And wouldn't it be a good thing for her if they did kick her out? You couldn't tell.

He cherished a half-acknowledged hope that he would see her or hear from her. More than once he imagined her riding up to his place. He even went and opened the door a couple of times at night, imagining he had heard a knock. He wanted to see her. And yet, if she had come . . . then what?

Chapter Twenty-One

LYNCH'S return jolted him sharply out of a mood of morose inanition. The ranger rode up to the cabin late one afternoon and grunted an inarticulate reply to Alec's greeting. He began at once pulling the saddle off the horse he had ridden and then threw it on the back of a fresh one he had led. Alec watched him, puzzled. Lynch did not speak until he had tightened the cinch on his fresh horse with a savage jerk of the latigo. Then he suddenly turned on his assistant.

"So that's the way you ride the range," he remarked sarcastically. "With a girl! . . . While that Mexican outfit from Coyote runs sheep all over the forest and tramps out a lot of young stuff. I told them down in town that I had left a good man up here and I thought I had until I heard how you had been carrying on."

Under this second assault Alec was angry enough to throw rocks. He threw rash words instead.

"Whom I've been riding with is none of anybody's goddam business," he announced. "I've

been all over this woodlot about fifty times since you left and I haven't seen a sheep."

"O, you haven't! You haven't seen a sheep! I suppose you thought those slick greasers would drive their stock right under your nose or maybe bring it down here for you to look at. You never thought to look for any tracks I suppose. Over there on the San Antonio the grass and the young timber is all tramped and eaten off till it looks like an army had gone through, but of course you wouldn't notice anything like that if you had of happened along."

Lynch mounted and rode away.

"Stay here until I come back," he shouted. "And don't let nobody steal your shirt while you're not looking!"

Alec stood for several minutes looking after the man. He had been very angry again for a moment, but this time his rage quickly died. Somehow these cumulative catastrophes began to seem funny.

There was no use in being angry with Lynch. Neither, as far as he could see, was there any use in being angry with himself. He had ridden the range dutifully. He had covered every mile of trail in his territory at least once a week, and it was true that he had never seen either a sheep or a sheep track. Very likely the reason was that he

never looked. Always when he rode he fell into deep thought. He could doubtless have ridden across the tracks of a million sheep while building houses and damming streams in his imagination.

One thing seemed clear. As a forester he was not a success. Even while he was thinking he began picking up his things and throwing them on a slicker that he had spread upon the floor.

Once he had begun making preparations to go, he was seized with a great and growing eagerness to be on his way. The cabin suddenly seemed too small and dingy, the canyon too narrow. As though a claustrophobia had struck him he yearned to be out of the mountains that had held him so long.

When he had finished his scanty packing he scrawled a note to Lynch. "I decided to pull out while I still have my shirt. Give the sheep my best regards."

He chuckled over this. His spirits were rising.

Lucretia! That was the word that hurt, the only real bond to be broken. He made a rapid calculation of his resources. He had still a few hundred dollars in a Santa Fe bank, an uncashed pay check and another coming to him, and his horse and saddle. He hadn't spent much for months. He felt almost rich. A check for half of all he had he made out to the girl, put it in an envelope and wrote her name on the outside.

Then he sat back and looked at it. He was not much pleased with his own gesture. It was a sop for his own conscience that he was giving her. Still, if she would take it, it would help her. She could strike out then, if she had the nerve. . . . He was not in a mood to criticize his motives.

At the Bullard place he dismounted, strode rapidly across the porch and hammered on the door. His swift and decisive manner covered an embarrassed trepidation.

After several minutes the old woman opened the door and stood staring at him in sullen silent surprise.

"Is Lucretia here?" he asked.

She continued to stare at him without a word.

"I'm leaving and I want to tell her good-bye," he added.

The old woman seemed to ponder this for a full minute. Then she went away without having said anything, leaving Alec uncertain whether his request was to be granted or not.

It was an uncomfortable five minutes before Lucretia appeared. She was pale, grave and calm and to him she seemed taller and more impressive than ever before. She did not say a word but stood looking up at him, questioning him with her wide sad eyes, filling him with pain and embarrassment.

He stood for a moment, hoping she would speak, but it became clear that she had no such in-

tention. She was putting it all up to him. . . . She might have told him what had happened. She might have protested, or asked for help and advice. She might have scolded him even. Anything would have been easier to face than this sorrowful, forgiving, hopeless stare, like that of a dying deer or a martyr awaiting the flames.

Nor could he bring himself to question her. It seemed impertinent.

"Well. . . . I'm going!" he blurted at last. "I just came to say good-bye."

She smiled at him wanly and then looked at her toes.

He felt a stir of something like anger. After all, they had both understood that he would go sooner or later. This was the inevitable end, wasn't it? What right did she have to make him feel like a criminal? And why did he feel like one, anyway?

Sheepishly, he handed her the envelope.

"Just a little parting message," he explained weakly. "Don't open it until I'm gone."

"Thanks," she said. It was her first word and rose little above a whisper.

They were tongue-tied again and he saw an unmistakable tear lighting the edge of her eye. . . . He could stand no more of this.

"Well. . . . Good-bye!" he said. He held out his hand and she took it.

"Good-bye," she said.

They stood for a terrible moment, holding hands almost formally—and then, all at once, they both began to laugh, and their laughter was a great and mutual relief. They laughed merrily, as though there was something supremely funny about it all. They laughed until tears stood in their eyes.

Laughter broke down walls of feeling that stood between them. He seized her by the shoulders and kissed her on the mouth. He kissed her several times and she returned his kisses. Still laughing he swung easily into the saddle and trotted away.

At the turn of the road he pulled up and looked back. She hadn't moved. He took off his hat and waved it in a gallant gesture.

From the turn of the road he waved and she waved back from the porch. Tearful but forgiving she waved farewells and he waved and turned and rode, lashing his astonished mount, burning the earth with his speed, as though sudden death had been one jump behind him.

He went past the store at a hard gallop, not looking around. He heard a shout and a laugh.

"Hey! Where the hell you going? To a fire?"

He thought he recognized Carney's voice but he did not pause or turn.

He had good and practical reason to ride hard. It was near sunset in the canyon. He would have

shown better sense to wait and start in the morning.

By the time he was out of the canyon and down among the foothills, darkness had fallen and it was a moonless cloudy night. Hills were only vague outlines and he could hear nothing but the wind in the brush, the creak of his own saddle leather and the crunch of hoof-iron on gravel.

It was too dark now for hard riding on a trail dimly seen and little known. His horse plodded and he felt lost and lonely. He longed to be out of the dark, out of the wilderness.

After a little while he began to doubt whether he was on the right trail. Wood roads and cattle paths crossed it and he was afraid he had taken a wrong turning. There was nothing by which to lay a course and he feared that he was going south instead of east. He would never be sure where he was until he came to the railroad. His eyes strained at the darkness. Finally he left the trail and spurred his grunting mount up a steep hill, a little higher than the others, hoping he might see lights.

On top of the hill he sat his horse unhappily. It seemed as though the whole world was made of darkness and silence and he was lost in it forever. He had no place in it, no real destination. He thought of Lucretia and felt a ridiculous impulse to go back to her again. He wished that he could

touch her, kiss her, not in desire, but only for the sake of a human contact—of feeling that he belonged to something and something belonged to him.

He had sat there in miserable indecision for a quarter of an hour when he heard what sounded like a faint shout. It was repeated and he identified it as the distant whistle of a locomotive.

A little later the trail emerged from a cut five or six miles to the east. It was one of the fast transcontinental passenger trains and it sailed through the night like a long black arrow, tipped and spotted with light. In the dead blackness of the night it looked immensely alive, cutting the dark with swift fiery purpose, rushing unerringly through the black inhuman chaos of the mountain night toward great cities of light and order. It shouted to him with the rich metallic voice of the machine—a voice of challenge and purpose, of conquering human will riding on steel and fire. It clove the dark muddle of his mood with a long sword of light, filling him with desire, pointing him a direction. Careless of the steep hill and the darkness he lashed his horse into a gallop straight toward the train, as though it had been a messenger of his destiny that he must overtake.

He was riding toward the city—the monster he had fled—and in his vision it shone with bright colors of desire. It was everything he wanted now,

everything he lacked. It was light and music and he was hungry for both. He longed for the human richness and the freedom of its crowd where a man might lose himself and yet find a thousand contacts. Above all, he knew it held a place for him, however small and hard. It was a struggle he could share. . . . Here in the empty darkness he felt its challenge, the urgency of its demand, as though it had drawn all free human energy by a physical magnetism not to be denied. He was half afraid of it but he knew it was where he belonged. It was his wilderness to explore, his peril. It was the frontier of his spirit.

Long before he reached the station he was riding joyfully again. He was out of the woods. He had found a new desire. His warm blood and eager senses were an inexhaustible source of the dream by which men live.

As he rode he suddenly thought of something that lent a new urgency to his going, touched his goal with a glow of hope. . . . If only she hadn't forgotten or changed her mind! He would send a telegram as soon as he struck town—something facetious, something casual—"Sun-burned silent man arriving Thursday. Please save dinner date."

HARVEY FERGUSSON, like FOOTLOOSE MCGARNIGAL, is a product of east and west. "My maternal grandfather," he writes, "was a pioneer who freighted merchandise across the *Santa Fe* trail in wagons, shot at the *Comanchees* and saw them ride away with two of his relatives and about eighty thousand dollars' worth of his goods. My father came in with the railroad, helped to start litigation and party politics, worked for statehood in Congress and introduced William Jennings Bryan when he came to make speeches about free silver. The great freight wagons rotted in my grandfather's yard and moth-eaten buffalo robes were relegated to the trunk room. I had a gun when I was nine and a horse when I was eleven, and for ten years I was a hunter in all my spare time." Since then Mr. Fergusson has been a Forest Ranger, a government employee in Washington, an embryo lawyer, a newspaper man, and, finally, a novelist. His career has led him all over the world, but his travels between two particular spots are so frequent that he has been heard to refer to himself as "a commuter between New Mexico and New York."

THIS BOOK WAS SET ON THE LINOTYPE IN A FACE CALLED CASLON. ELECTROTYPED, PRINTED AND BOUND BY H. WOLFF ESTATE, NEW YORK. THE PAPER WAS MADE BY S. D. WARREN CO., BOSTON.

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